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ON DISTANCE: FROM ART HISTORY TO ERNEST MANCOBA

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ON DISTANCE: FROM ART HISTORY TO ERNEST MANCOBA

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the award of the degree
of
Master of Arts in Art Historical Studies

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town

April 2007

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

ABSTRACT

In this thesis the central narratives of Western art history, specifically those related to modernism and African art, are considered in light of a climate of criticism concentrated over the past thirty years in Western and South African historiography.

In considering complexities of interpretation of the life and work of the African modernist painter, Ernest Mancoba, I address a perceived need for a critical discourse pertaining to early black South African modernist art. As a way of organising both my critique and contribution, I establish and use the thematic of distance. This work argues for greater consideration of individual motivation and circumstance in our understanding of early African modernist art production.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mary Ryan, Michael Godby and Anna Tietze.

Katie Spiegel, Cath Crookes, Gerard Ralphs and Diana van Zyl.

CONTENTS PAGE

Introduction	1
Institutional Distance: Towards a Critical South African Art History	6
Introduction	6
1.1 Reading old	7
1.1.1 The Italian tradition	8
1.1.2 History as progress	9
1.1.3 Old models in South African art history	10
1.1.4 Summary	12
1.2 Reading new	13
1.2.1 Political new	13
1.2.2 "Theoretical new	1
1.2.3 The critique of (Mind Narratives	
1.2.4 Subversive reading: deconstruction as subversive strategy	
1.3 Distance as a heuristic	23
1.3.1 The ownership of depicted distance	24
1.3.2 Distant makers	25
1.3.3 Hermeneutics and interpretive distance	26
Conclusion	28
2 Modernist Writing, Distant Reading	29
Introduction	29
2.1 Modernity/modernisms	31
2.1.1 Some preliminary definitions	32
2.1.2 The Modern	32
2.1.3 Liminal Spaces 1: two worlds and being en-route	34
2.1.4 Liminal Spaces 2: the collective African	37
2.1.5 Modernist paradoxes	39
2.2 Singularity and an history	40
Conclusion	42
3 Traversing Distances: Ernest Mancoba	43
Introduction	43
3.1 A preliminary historical sketch	45
3.2 Institutional distance: geographic and depicted	54
3.3 Distance: interpretive	59
3.3.1 Mancoba and mainstream modernism: Rasheed Aracen	60
3.3.2 Mancoba and African modernism(s): Olu Oguibe	62
3.3.3 Mancoba and African nationalism: Denis Ekpo	
3.3.4 Mancoba and African spirituality: Bridget Thompson	64
3.3.5 Interpretive distance: some conclusions	65
Conclusion	69
Bibliography	72

INTRODUCTION

The conception of 'Distance' suggests, in connexion with Art, certain trains of thought by no means devoid of interest or of speculative importance.

Edward Bullough, 1912

There is distance in art. From the time of its production to the instances of its wider reception, art traverses space and time in both literal and complexly metaphorical ways. This is the distance art has to cover — from 'I' to 'you' and, at times, mediated by 'us' (art historians, critics, curators, etc.). As a defining trope in art, considered both physically (between the picture and the spectator) and pictorially (the conventions of the depiction of figure and ground), distance, as Edward Bullough confirms, is therefore of no small significance to art history — the discipline dedicated to art's historical conceptualisation and aesthetic explanation. Numerous western art historians have worded, *at length*, the teleology of naturalistic perspective (depicted distance) and its subsequent subversion in modern art, whilst others have produced treatises on aesthetic appreciation (spectator distance) and interpretive strategies. In discourses on art traditionally excluded from Western narratives, scholarship has questioned the foundations of the categories of an art and artist, exploring alternative definitions and motivations. There is regarding all these words, extensive contestation within art history, of the distance between words and the authorial intention behind the work they are used to interpret — a hermeneutic or epistemological distance (Alpers 1978, Bal 1991, Baxandall 1985). The existence of pure authorial intention and stability of meaning has been philosophically interrogated (Barthes 1977, Derrida 1988, Foucault 1991, Wimsatt & Beardsley 1976). This *trajectory*, of a shifting field of interpretive strategies within art history on the subject of art and artists past, speaks of an uncomfortable relationship between intention and interpretation. Who is this contingent 'I', and this unknowable, unpredictable 'you' and what is the nature of the distance between them? What is the role of art history, produced by 'us', in this communicative event, and how has this role changed over the past thirty years?

Therefore, from the traditions of picturing distance in art (pictorial distance) and in the space between high and low art (value distance), to issues of interpretation (hermeneutic distance), I find the institution of art history and art criticism to be steeped in different registers of distance. In this thesis I highlight these instances of distance, evident in both the foundations

and subjects of art history as well as in recent critiques concerning authorship and interpretation, and develop 'distance' as a heuristic to assist my investigation of South African modernism and the artist constituting my case study, Ernest Mancoba. From the macro level, observing trends in art history — a bird's eye view — to the level of the meta-narrative in my discussion on modernism, and finally to an account of an individual artist, this thesis traverses vast distances. This journey recalls the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle and the continual pursuit of ways of interpreting and understanding the past. The literal enactment of distance by Ernest Mancoba, who relocated to Paris in the late 1930s, provides further thematic continuity with the notion of distance.

In sum, I intend to problematise the study of art history in South Africa and to extract and develop 'distance' as a useful concept for the discipline in this context, and for this period of early African modernism. I seek to emphasise the importance of historical contingencies pertaining to an individual artist and to try and extrapolate an appropriate set of questions and recommendations for future reference in the field of South African modernism.

Chapter 1: In this chapter I examine the shifts in Western art history and theory over the past thirty years and their impact on South African art historiography. Over this period, traditional art historical narratives, particularly in relation to a) radically new interpretive strategies and b) art produced outside of western centres, have been held to new levels of critique.

By establishing the main points of criticism under the rubric of the 'new art history' and by seeking to integrate new methods and theories in the form of a postcolonial art history, my intention in this chapter is partly to contextualise my approach and the research material constituting this thesis. Firstly, it serves as the background to my own methodology in this thesis, which is aligned to some of the new approaches in the discipline. Secondly, it seeks to position Lize Van Robbroeck's thesis, considered in chapter 2, in which she, significantly, incorporates deconstruction and broader postmodern interpretive strategies in her analysis of white writings in South African art history. Thirdly, it assists to situate the various writings on Ernest Mancoba (chapter 3) in a temporal frame and to measure shifts in art historical trends relating to black African modernism. Finally, this chapter elaborates the concept of 'distance' to be applied in the later chapters: *on the one hand*, this chapter serves to position the 'centre', i.e. the people and places that have historically defined Western concepts of art and artists, in other words, the place from whence distance is measured; *on the other*, I use examples and instances of the occurrence of distance *in* and *about* art history to explicate the category of 'distance', used in later chapters.

Chapter 2: Following the historical demarcation of new theoretical approaches in chapter 1, in this chapter I examine a particular historian's use of these approaches in her 'deconstruction' of modernist tendencies in South African art history. By aligning with aspects of Lize van Robbroeck's doctoral study, I position the subject of my own thesis — writing art history about African modernism — within recent attempts to problematise historical interpretations of black artists working in the early 1900s. Past interpretations demonstrate a close relationship to Enlightenment-informed discourses pertaining to the 'Other'. As far as Van Robbroeck's project is concerned, these discourses belie a set of contradictions when approaching the modern black subject and the fact that Mancoba has largely been ignored in South African art writing is testimony to this.

My intention in this chapter is to sufficiently problematise/theorise the task of writing art history about South African modernism by demonstrating that the rigid categories and narratives used to structure art historical accounts in the past are untenable in the present. Such categories, as for example 'transitional art', are shown to demonstrate the legacy of taxonomic practices evident in the early foundations of the human sciences.

This chapter further elaborates the concept of 'distance' with a specific focus on the notion of 'Othering'. This is to assist the critical project of dismantling modernist-type narratives for the task of 're-writing' the history of South African modernism.

I conclude this chapter by extending Van Robbroeck's appeal for singularity in approaching African modernism. This concept is to be used to organize my findings in both chapter 3 and in the conclusion.

Chapter 3: This chapter employs 'distance' in a case study of the artist Ernest Mancoba. I present my argument *against* essentialised accounts of his placement in art history and *for* more nuanced and individualised analysis by examining writings on Mancoba and African modernism by art historians and cultural theorists using aspects of the approaches elaborated in the first chapter and, importantly, the concept of 'distance'. The various aspects of 'distance', when applied to the life and work of Ernest Mancoba, provide insight into his contribution in the arts. It is also useful in understanding and organising the attempts to theorise his work as part of the broader project to delineate and describe African modernism(s).

METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

This thesis is informed by new theoretical approaches to 'writing' history following, amongst other positions in the discipline (see chapter 1), Hayden White's notion of metahistory. White has argued that "... it is a methodological error to make a clear-cut distinction between history, or the narrative form which describes what has happened in history, and the philosophy of history, or the interpretive schema or theory that legitimises the narrative" (Macey 2000:249). My employment of 'distance' as an organising thematic in my analysis of South African history and African modernism promotes a narrative form of historical analysis. The integration of theory and methodology in the form of 'distance', which I use as both theoretical tool and method for approaching and organising the content, acknowledges that rhetorical textual devices are inherent in the philosophical frame in which history as a discipline has its roots. This pertains to the objective and scientific ambitions embedded in the language of historical discourse during its early inception as a discipline in the human sciences. This thesis is text based and inevitably employs some of these rhetorical tropes. I also present a trope of my own construction — 'distance'. The content is taken from literature on art historiography, critical theory, modernism and Ernest Mancoba and thus takes the form of an extended literature survey. I present the chapter on Mancoba as a form of case study. In it I consider both archival information sourced by others, debates within current literature and, most importantly apply my own theoretical formation.

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Heuristic — A model or procedure that assists explanation or interpretation but is not necessarily a proof. I use heuristic as a noun to describe the function of 'distance' as it is used in this thesis. 'Distance' as a heuristic is a useful conceptual category that I develop to facilitate my understanding of early African modernism and Ernest Mancoba.

Hermeneutic circle — Traditionally the study of the principles of biblical interpretation as developed during the Reformation, hermeneutics has evolved to encompass all textual utterances and to people and events. Under Dilthey hermeneutics "moves from being an interpretation of a text to being a historicist interpretation of the situation of the author himself" (Macey 2000:151). Following the linguistic turn and the problematic of a final interpretation, hermeneutics is proclaimed less as a path to truth and fact, but as a realisation of the inconclusive nature of interpretation and the situation of the author. Gadamer and

Heidegger propose that the process of interpretation is seen as a circuitous project involving a relational property — between the author, the subject and the context (D'Alleva 2005:125-6). The hermeneutic circle suggests that understanding begins somewhere around *the subject*. In the third chapter of this thesis, I invoke the image of the hermeneutic circle to describe the common endeavour of attempting to understand the complex nature of early African modernism and the differing authorial positions.

Modernism — In this thesis, modernism is used in the lower case throughout (unless beginning a sentence) to assert the multiplicity of modern expressions in different parts of the world and as an acknowledgment of the contestation of locality and 'centring'. Where necessary I prefix the term with a more precise location or racial affiliation, e.g. black South African modernism.

Singularity — I follow from Lize van Robbroeck's usage of this term, which speaks of the need to uncover the complex experiences and construction of subjectivity of the *individual* artist in our understanding of particular periods of art history. See chapter 2 for further elaboration of this concept.

CHAPTER 1

INSTITUTIONAL DISTANCE: TOWARDS A CRITICAL SOUTH AFRICAN ART HISTORY.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the historical and theoretical framework from which I extract and develop the heuristic of distance. It is the numerous instances of distance that surface in art history, as well as the difficulties of historical interpretation motivated by new critiques, that have prompted me to pursue this thematic in a systematic way. My use of the notion of interpretive distance in debates about African modernism, are aligned to some of the new theoretical approaches in the discipline under the rubric of a new or critical art history. This chapter, then, provides both the background as well as the conceptual tools for my discussion of South African art historiography, African modernism and Ernest Mancoba. This artist engages notions of geographic and depicted distance in his art and actions, and in doing so presents epistemological challenges to interpretive strategies and traditional methodologies.

Emerging in the early 1980s as a convenient title for a wide range of approaches to the study of art, the new art history' included, amongst other things: theoretical advances in linguistics, feminist and Marxist studies, psychoanalytic and postcolonial enquiries, and revealed, "... a discipline asking itself a number of awkward questions" (Rees & Borzello 1986:2). I will be looking at some of the questions that challenge institutionalised conventions of distance in art history, including: ethnographic distance and Eurocentrism; critical' and value distance (the distinction between high and low art); the depiction of distance in art works (the traditions of mimesis and perspective) and its break-down in modern art; gender distance; and importantly, the distance created through different art

Research for aspects of this chapter was conducted during a broader Investigation of the Mew art history' for a course in the historiography of art, which the author undertook at UCT in early 2006.

' Historically, this was not the first claim to a Mew' art history. In the early to mid twentieth century, Aby Warburg, and later his student Erwin Panofsky, developed the iconographic/iconological approach which contrasted radically to Wolffian formalism. Likewise, the formalist school with its roots in early twentieth century literary theory differed to the institutionalised biographical approaches of Giorgio Vasari and Giorgio Belleri and later in the eighteenth century, the early iconographic approach of Johann Winkelmann.

historical interpretations. This inquiry is towards the development of an art historical frame cognisant of historical and contemporary contingencies in the postcolonial and post-apartheid context.⁴

I begin by examining shifts in the field of art history over the past fifty years. Over this period, Western art historical narratives, particularly in relation to the modernist paradigm, have been held to new levels of critique. It is my intention throughout this chapter to keep in sharp focus the status of art historical studies in South Africa and measure the impact of the various theoretical advances on the practice and study of art history in this country. This, in itself, is a demonstration of the distance that ideas travel and what happens along the way. Following this, I explicate the notion of 'distance' as a heuristic to be applied in the later chapters, and which constitutes the main contribution of this thesis.

1.1 READING OLD

Stephen Bann asks, "Is there a traditional art history and is it dead?" (1986:20)' in order to establish whether the approaches that some art historians adopted in the 1970s and 1980s can be deemed 'new' or 'radical' if they cannot be easily contrasted to a defined old or traditional approach. The designation 'new' presents a further problem in that it perpetuates a central tenet of the 'older' model — the persistent categorization and atomisation of art into styles, schools and periods.⁵ Under scrutiny, as with many of the categories in art history, the boundary between 'old' and 'new' approach is a fluid one. Such fluidity complicates the numerous attempts to extract a unified definition of an older approach. For example, in her review of the subject, Dawn Ades (1986) describes the old model as being linear, progressive and impartial where some artists appear and others do not, operating within a hermetic and defined aesthetic. Victor Burgin defines the old art history as isolating "works from the broader social circumstances of their production and reception" (1986:41). On the character of the historians involved in this kind of art history writing in Britain, Jonathan Harris notes:

A prevalent caricature of the social composition of art history's scholars and students before the 1970s, in Britain at any rate, represents them as upper-class, 'amateur'

⁴ Immanuel Kant's influential philosophical approach to aesthetics granted the 'disinterested' critic objective insight for the judgement of beauty.

⁵ I acknowledge certain criticisms (D'Alleva 2005) of the 'post' in postcolonial and post-apartheid which seems to negate colonial or pervasive racist attitudes in the present, for example in neo-colonial relationships of economic dependency.

⁶ From an essay suggestively titled *How Revolutionary is the New Art History?* (1986).

⁷ The atomisation of art, epitomised by Alfred Barr's 1935 schematic of modern art has been critiqued on a number of counts: for example, its inability to account for art produced outside of its categories as well as the fluid relationships between groups, or the idiosyncrasies of individual artists whose work is not easily bracketed. See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 1994, pp. 232-36 for a discussion of the impact of Barthes diagram.

gentlemen, concerned mainly with appreciating the good taste of the paintings on the walls of their own, or parents', drawing-rooms (2001: 22).

My discussion proceeds despite complexities emerging from attempts at the classification and bracketing of past and emerging interpretive strategies. By citing, on the one hand, common elements in 'popular' art history — from Kleinbauer at the cusp of the new, to Vasari at the origins of the old — and more 'radical' theoretical critiques on the other, I suggest that clear lines of distinction can be drawn.

David Carrier, discussing *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History* (1971) by W. Eugene Kleinbauer notes that the anthology contains "no account of feminism, nothing about structuralist and post-structuralist theorising, and no explicit discussion of the concerns with rhetoric and historiography ..." (2002:251) and instead, in line with its predecessors, by way of totalised accounts of an history — Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1951) and Helen Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* (first published in 1926), to name two — highlights European medieval, Christian and Renaissance painting and architecture. These chronological expositions, although undeniably linked with a consumerist demand, are indicative of a general approach to the study of art history that dominated the early colleges from the mid 19th century and continues to influence syllabi in secondary and tertiary institutions. Here I recall the linear methodology of my own high school art syllabus fashioned on an (albeit idiosyncratic) understanding of Gombrich's *Story*. Apart from serving didactic purposes in institutions with a chronological framework, these books promote the objects of their study within an intricate web of rhetoric, or historic self-fulfilment. This can be traced to the father figure of modern history, Hegel. It is also an indication of the influence of the Italian artistic tradition in Western art and art history, to which I first turn.

L1.1 THE ITALIAN TRADITION

Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Eminent Architects, Painters and Sculptors from Cimabue to Our Times* (1550), containing biographical information, description and anecdotes, provided the prototype for much subsequent art historical analysis and for the formation of the canon of great artists and times of great art. Vasari further instituted the notion of the 'organic' development of the arts — the biological metaphor — the notion that art, as with humans, is born, grows up then becomes old and dies — in his typology of the Renaissance. This notion is taken up by Heinrich Winckelmann who, working two hundred years later, defined what is known as the 'classical' Greek period as the height of naturalistic representation (the 'ideal') following on from the early stylized (archaic) period and followed by the decline of an excessive Hellenistic period. For Winckelmann these are recurring moments within the broader scheme of history, notably the Baroque being an instance of decline.

In her introduction to *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1983), Svetlana Alpers draws attention to the influence (following Vasari) that art and its studies from Italy have, and continue to have, on the discipline in the West. This includes the lasting emphasis on mimesis and perspective and which is present in Alberti's elaboration of the picture-as-window:

In referring to the definition of art in the Italian Renaissance, I have in mind the Albertinian definition of the picture: a framed surface or pane situated at a certain distance from a viewer who looks through it at a second or substitute world (1983:xix).

The Italian pictorial traditions, Alpers suggests, constituted a persistent model of which both Western artist and historian from the 15th through the 19th century (citing Vasari, Wölfflin and Panofsky) have been influenced. The "definitive place" of the Italian conception of an meant, that it has proved difficult to find appropriate language to deal with images that do not fit this model" (1983:xx). Despite this difficulty, Alpers proceeds to forge distinctive terms with which to discuss 17th century Dutch painting — as narrative description — with its own set of conventions.¹ The implications of Alpers' study for this thesis are: firstly, locating the influence and innovation of the Italian tradition regarding mimesis and depicted distance — citing Alberti (I shall return to this at a later stage); and secondly, that Alpers demonstrates the possibility for challenging the core rhetoric of a dominant art historical tradition using precisely the language imbedded in its discourses.

1.1.2 HISTORY AS PROGRESS

Hegel's conception of history and art centres on a three-stage process towards an expression of the essential 'spirit' or idea (Elkins, 2002). The first of the three stages used natural objects as symbols of this 'spirit', the second stage (classical) used the human form to express it (Greek and Roman), and lastly, the apotheosis (the romantic stage) where natural forms return and the idea or 'spirit is expressed through a heightened self-awareness which is, "... at last free to take whatever form it will" (Elkins, 2002:53). Summers links this to a broader emphasis on individuality during the Enlightenment as expressed in the Kantian idea, "...consciousness constitutes its world ..." (1998:128), and further details the Wölfflinian approach to form — not simply a by-product but as "expression of the essential freedom of the human spirit" (*ibid*). A perceived link between Hegel's conception and those forwarded by art historians from Vasari and Wölfflin to Gombrich, Gardner and Kleinbauer (in the works cited above) is both in the presentation of a diachronic understanding of history in terms of progression, as well as the notion of the ideal expression of an idea or 'spirit in art at the height of its development, although this is located at different times. James Elkins further

¹ For exatuple, the "... absence of a positioned viewer ... the absence of a prior Frame ... a formidable sense of the picture as surface ... an insistence of the craft of representation" etc. (Alpers, 1983: xxv).

suggests that, "these two art historical projects, mending the Zeitgeist and repairing the progress of the Idea, account for the majority of art historical writing" (2002:54).

In recalling Hegel's project, my intention is to examine the reinforcement of a narrative predisposition and an established canon of Western art emerging in the 16th century with Giorgio Vasari, and their omnipresence in the books cited above." Vasari's project was to "establish what was to become the dominant art historical and critical tradition in which the heritage of Florentine art was seen as paradigmatic of a revived antique glory" (Preziosi, 1998:22). And, prefiguring Hegel: "Vasari's history of art was above all a history of precedents in the progressive approximation to a norm or ideal manifested in its fulfilment by the work of his own time" (ibid. 4).

1.1.3 OLD MODELS IN SOUTH AFRICAN ART HISTORY

In the preceding section I examined some of the underlying ideas that weave through the more recent projects of Gardner, Gombrich, Kleinbauer and, as will now be illustrated, through the institutionalised practical and art historiographical tradition in South Africa prior to 1980.

One of the earliest beginnings of a local 'Western' art discourse in South Africa is with Thomas Bowler (1812-1869) who held classes at the South African College (1850s) where the discussion focused on the principles and practices of art according to JD Harding's *Lessons on Art* (Duffey 1996). In the fashion of the previously discussed books and approaches, subsequent art history in South Africa followed a similar Eurocentric tradition in the vein of the English government art syllabus, which dominated the colonies (Duffey 1996). As new chairs dedicated to fine arts emerged, first at Michaelis (University of Cape Town) in 1922, and at the University of Natal in 1924 these approaches promoted an "elite readership, knowledge in the language of art discourse and well versed in Western stylistic development" (Duffey, 1996:4). In a study by Van der Waal (cited in Duffey, 1996) out of a total of 245 postgraduate studies in art history completed between roughly 1930 and 1980 at South African universities, nearly all indicated a conventional approach "with the main themes being: the life and work of an artist (30 studies), iconographic aspects (22 studies), technical aspects (22 studies), formal aspects (21 studies), stylistic developments (20 studies), documentation of works of art (19 studies) and art education (17 studies)" (Duffey, 1996:4).

" It must be noted that Gombrich (1963) has criticized certain forms of historical essentialism and the uncritical use of categories.

At primary and high school level, a similar conservatism dominated. In a 1986 study[°] of the art history syllabi at various departments of education in South Africa, Victor Honey found that approximately 83,5% of course content emphasised Western European and American art. Further, of the featured South African artists, nearly all were white (all the painters were white) and from the Transvaal (1986:121). He also notes that where black artists were concerned (besides the inclusion of two sculptors namely Lucas Sithole and Sydney Khumalo), the emphasis was on Bushman and rock art in South Africa; tribal dwellings and traditional Bantu craft (1986:121). He surmises: "these would tend to do no more than confine the contribution of the black artist to the past and on to a particular rural, 'pre-industrial' context" (Honey 1986:121). Honey concludes that the compilers of such school art history syllabi were to be faulted on what they have excluded, "what they have not said and by what they have not committed themselves to ..." (1986:121).

To extend Honey's argument, marginalised art forms fell outside of the categories of South African art dialogue due to the close following of Western art historical narratives — in Gombrich's *Story* only 22 pages of a total of 637 relate to non-Western art (Elkins, 2002:64) — but also, in no small part, owing to the hegemonic attitudes of the ruling class and its policies of political, cultural and intellectual domination. According to the Minister of Education and Training, F. Hartzenberg in 1980: "Educational Policies in South Africa must be dictated by Apartheid philosophy" (cited in Mcleod 1986:136). Mcleod also refers to a lesser-known quote by National Party politician J.N le Roux in 1945 that encapsulates this philosophy of separate education: "We should not give the natives any academic education. If we do, who is going to do the manual labour in the community?" (1986:136). The policies that enforced these views were the 1953 *Bantu Education Act* and its more recent form, the 1979 *Education and Training Act*.

Thus, the emphasis in South African art history prior to 1980 was undeniably biased towards the Western canons of art as epitomised by the Gombrich and Gardner anthologies mentioned. This is further reinforced by the lack of serious art historical writing about black artists working in both stylistic and thematically different ways to white 'Western' artists. As noted earlier, the danger of the categorisation of artists in linear terms of progression is that it does not adequately account for art produced outside of its boundaries. It also, more seriously, demarcates a conceptual categorisation of people who are deemed 'pre-industrial' or as being 'en-route' and is, in this sense, paradigmatic of nineteenth and early-twentieth

[°] Presented at the South African Association of Art Historians conference, 17-19 July 1986. See bibliography for full reference.

century attitudes towards the 'Other'. I will return to this when discussing alternative approaches to art history which suggested a radical rethinking of this model.

1.1.4 SUMMARY

To encapsulate some of the elements of a 'traditional' approach to art history that I have recalled thus far, I offer a set of broad characteristics. This is in order to proceed to a discussion of new approaches in the following section.

Firstly, following Vasari's model, was the establishment and continuation of the canon of great artists (male geniuses) and times of great art. For art history devoted to this canon the biographical approach was largely adopted. This approach stressed the importance of the author (the artist) and also emphasised *his* uniqueness and individuality: the 'artist-as-genius'. Here, the highly influential interpretive assumption is the pure presence of an author's intention. Secondly, the institutionalisation of certain aesthetic or representational aims, for example the attainment of mimesis or naturalism and, much later, abstraction. These aims were often framed in a progressive, chronological system and analysed formalistically. The formal analysis traced stylistic developments and, in many cases, related these to the rise and fall of art — a kind of life cycle or the 'biological metaphor'. Finally, the study of art belonging to a small and exclusive group, or connoisseurship. This marked the ownership of art and art history as exclusively Western and as a product of high culture.

It is not suggested that the approaches taken after 1970 entirely reject these ideas⁹ and there are numerous instances of critiques of some of these assumptions prior to this date. It is the concentration, however, of criticisms and newly suggested approaches which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in contrast to the broad characteristics above, that give weight to the claim of a 'new art history'. It is also not suggested that art history, as practiced within academic institutions both abroad and in South Africa, is a homogenous discipline — uniformly following academic and theoretical trends. Rather, it is frequently the case that historians working within the same faculty follow opposing methodological, even ideological paths.¹⁰ The intended contrast between old and new in this thesis, as with much of post-1970 art history, is to draw attention to that which has been previously excluded from the traditional canon of art history. The 'new art history' provides the critical language to discover such points of exclusion and new methods for inclusion. I turn now to the history of this

Marylin Stokstad's *Art History* (1995), containing 1 350 illustrations and 6 000 entries, in its enormity is written with words steeped in these nations, and display anachronistic tendencies in her attempt at neutrality. Elkus writes, "...words like groundline, register, abstraction, and decoration float like fragments of a shipwreck, detached from their original purposes" (2002:78).

⁹ A tension between social and formalist allegiances commonly divides art history departments. For an insightful account of this friction and its implications I refer the reader to Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty* (2006).

movement as a way of introducing my theoretical alignments and the conceptual framework to be used in the latter parts of this thesis.

1.2 READING NEW

It is almost twenty-four years since the term 'the new art history' was first used in a documented form.¹² In the first section of this chapter I revealed some of the problematic aspects of this term, which seemed to encompass so many diverse approaches to the study of an history. Central to these criticisms was the question of how newness is defined, i.e. by whom and opposed to what? However, after this long a period since its inception it seems peculiar to continue calling it 'the new when it is, by now, old 'history'. I will now be focusing, retrospectively, on the history of 'the new art history', as it has been defined by those who have, with some authority, used the term." On the one hand, there is danger in assigning these propositions the status of 'movement or 'project by historicising them (Harris 2001). Despite the title of his book," Harris acknowledges this and other shortcomings of the term and for the most part uses the alternative, 'radical art history'. On the other hand, one can proceed to describe the approaches taken by an historians in the 1970s and 1980s who themselves advocated the newness of their approach.

If Harris, as I have noted, stresses the socio-political factors" in his analysis, an alternative emphasis advocated by Danto and Kauffman, amongst others, places the linguistic turn at the locus of the emergence and formation of the new approaches to art history. These two positions, however, are far from mutually exclusive. For simplicity I begin with the socio-political upheavals of 1968 continuing into the early 1970s, and the dissident voices of early Marxist, social and feminist art historians that emerged. This is to be followed by a section on theoretical inroads and their impact on the discipline.

1.2.1 POLITICAL NEW

The discontent with the way state universities were run and the conservative nature of academia at the time, played a significant part in the student-involved riots in Paris, May 1968. This was not an isolated incident and various strikes and demonstrations occurred in

One of the earliest usages was as part of the title for a conference at Middlesex Polytechnic in 1982 — 'The New Art History?'

Alpers (1983), Bann, Ades, Burgin, Rees and Borzello (1986), Bryson, Danto, Kauffman (1988), Pointon (1994), Presiozi (1990), Harris, Fernie (2001) are the art historians I have come across. In South Africa both Elizabeth Rankin and Cohn Richards refer to it at the 3rd conference of the SA Association of Art Historians held in 1987.

¹² 'The New Art History A Critical Introduction' (2001).

He further suggests that a common outlook of historical materialism is shared amongst the various proponents of this 'radical art history' (Harris 2001:264).

cities across Europe and America. The unrest combined with a severe dissatisfaction of capitalist systems and the emergence of certain Marxist oriented political and cultural writings," to create a sense of revolutionary urgency. Although this was not to produce significant changes at the time, there resulted in its wake a new wave of Marxist and feminist critiques of society, culture and the academic institutions devoted to their study. Along with the philosophically directed approach of Louis Althusser, earlier writings of Benjamin, Marcuse and Adorno impacted upon an influential, intellectual 'New Left' within the Western avant-garde (Hohendahl 1981). An history, although a relatively young academic discipline, came under strong criticism for its conservative institutionalised practices of the time (Rees and Borzello 1986).¹⁸

Amidst this criticism there emerged a concentration of voices advocating for the social re-readings of canonised works of art and artists. T J Clark (1984) called for, "an archaeology of the subject in its heroic period: a critical history, uncovering assumptions and allegiances" (cited in Harris 2001:36). Clark demonstrated his new methodology in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Revolution of 1848*, which was first published in 1973 but written, incidentally, between 1969 and 1970 (Harris 2001). For Clark, the social art history should draw attention to the convergence of economic, political, social and institutional factors, amongst many others, that inform the production of art. It is important to note here that in the 1920s Panofsky, working counter to formalist approaches, proposed a similar need for the cultural and historical contextualisation of art. Other early forerunners including Antal, Hauser and Klingender are to be equally acknowledged in this approach. However, in the 1970s the 'Social Art Historians', as they came to be known, perceived the need to counter a dominant formalism within academic institutions with an expanded contextualisation of historical contingency:¹⁸ Iconographic analysis was perceived as restricted and descriptive in nature:¹⁹ Although Marxist in tone,²⁰ Clark rejected the simplification that artworks 'reflect' ideology and class struggle (as Lukacs emphasised), largely on the grounds that it isolates and abstracts artistic production (Harris 2001). Instead, Clark raised the centrality of the artist:

The point is this: the encounter with history and its specific determinations is made by the artist himself. The social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that he encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific

¹⁸ The writings of the Frankfurt school, notably Benjamin, Marcuse and Adorno, although written decades earlier, were only translated into English in the late 1960s and 1970s.

¹⁹ Britain the New Art Association (NAA) 1971 condemned the sterility and conservatism of the subject.

²⁰ Rees and Borzello further comment on the differences between older socially oriented readings of art and the new 'Social Art History': "The strand in mainstream art history which tried to place art in its social context began from the art and worked outwards; the new form reverses the procedure, looking from the social fabric to the art it produces. Its central interests lie in an investigation of how the social order is represented and endorsed by art and in the analysis of the institutions of art, including art history itself" (1986:8).

Alpers (1983) remarks that Panofsky's method was developed with the story of the Italian Renaissance in mind.

Another clear influence can be drawn here with the writings of Georg Lukacs, who championed the Marxist cause of realism in art and literature.

conditions of one such meeting. How, in a particular case, content becomes a form, an event becomes an image, boredom becomes its representation, and despair becomes spleen: these are the problems (Clark 1973:13).

However, the influence of Marxist debates cannot be understated, as for example, the realism/modernism dispute that dominated Europe in the 1960s. Whereas Georg Lukacs placed emphasis on realism in art (largely via content), Walter Benjamin's near antithetical position, regarded the modernist movement (and the assertion of the medium) as central. Benjamin theorised the impact of modern technology and mass consumption on the ritual/sacred value (the aura) of art in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (1936). By undermining the elite position of art, mass production "simultaneously undermines the elite status of the social class which can afford to buy and exclusively own such works" (Harland 1999:141). Benjamin thus rejected the cult of the artist-genius so ingrained in art history to this point.

These debates within Marxist circles had far reaching implications within art history by contributing to the general "demystification" of art production and the cult of the artist-as-genius: unpacking the institutionalised canons of art history.

Interconnected with the social art historical project, but perhaps on a more urgent political level considerable voices were heard from feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Lucy Lippard. Here too were strong connections to activists and theorists prior to the 1960s such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. But within the discipline of art history, the feminist project only assumed a highly politicised approach in the 1970s and 1980s. As noted with regards the social art history, early feminist art historians embarked on a critical re-writing of art history, focusing on overturning the male dominated discourses of art.²³ Parker and Pollock's, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) drew on advances within the social art history and the Marxist theorisations described above to develop an account of the operations of ideology in art. Their work presents a forceful reminder of a stubborn institutionalised approach, questioning why, for instance, neither E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* nor H.W. Janson's *History of Art* make mention of female artists (Harris 2001).

This was exemplified by the critic/writer John Berger, in his television series and publication *Ways of Seeing* (1973) that provided a standing counterpoint to an approach to art history exemplified by Kenneth Clarke in his series, *Civilisation*. In it, Berger attempts to unpack the production of art by interrogating the relationship between an artwork's aesthetic value and its market value. Focusing particularly on advertising and its reference to earlier art forms, Berger echoed much of Walter Benjamin's hypothesis.

²³ What Nochlin calls, "a recuperation of lost production and lost modes of productivity, [and] has its own historical validity, and, as such, can function as part of the questioning of the conventional formulation of the parameters of the discipline" (cited in Harris 2001:98).

As the ideas of early feminist and Marxist writers and activists influenced these approaches in Europe and the United States, despite institutional, cultural and political opposition, this was also the case in South Africa, albeit on a much smaller scale. Besides Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Marx and Engels' *Historical Materialism*, in accordance with the various Publications Acts, the South African government also banned key works by Gramsci, Lucaks, Marcuse and Althusser, to name a few'. However, this was little deterrent to a highly politicised yet small an community, evidenced by the 'protest' art exhibited in the 1971 *Art South Africa Today* exhibition.

The year 1968 in South Africa, marked a turn towards more active resistance with the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement and a Marcuse-inspired New Left. If the resistance displayed in 'protest art' was actively assertive, institutionalised an history for the most part remained stagnant in this regard despite its growth. By the end of the 1970s, the years of white prosperity, twelve of the sixteen South African universities offered courses in the history of an (Duffey 1996). But Skawran (cited in Duffey 1996:4) notes the following in 1976:

We are reluctant to revise traditional and often outmoded views on art and to create opportunities where vitally significant issues such as art terminology and concepts of art are discussed, and where dynamic programmes and research projects could be developed for different Art History departments in the country. This reluctance to communicate and thrash out problems is the reason why we have as yet not fought our way clear of second-rate art appreciation, and why there is a tendency to teach an accumulation of facts rather than methods.

It seems that despite the increasing popularity of art history, there emerged an institutional resistance to the interrogation of the discipline that the new methodologies proposed. Part of the problem, as much recent criticism has shown, was the lack of interest granted to different producers of art or different kinds of art production such as: African art and artists, performance art or art in popular culture, to name a few. These 'subjects' would, necessarily, impose a loosening of methodological approach and expansion of the canon. In addition, political pressure of apartheid cultural policy upon institutions of learning cannot be underestimated. However, if an history at an institutional level stagnated somewhat, works of fine art and literature maintained a sense of political urgency even within universities and technikons. Rankin attributes this discrepancy to a lack of staff and the competition between disciplines:

"Listed in Jacobsens": mventory of banned publications 04681.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the thrust in the history of art at the University of the Witwatersrand was towards its internal development as a discipline.... [but], as part of the Department of Fine Arts; sharing - indeed competing for - resources with practical art, hampered some aspects of growth (Rankin 1987:89).

If I have conjured an overall image of a conservative discipline and one that inadvertently suggests homogeneity in the field, this was not always the case. There were many instances of both progressive and self-critical approaches to the discipline in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Elizabeth Rankin's explication of the transformation of the art history department at the University of the Witwatersrand after 1975¹¹ is a case in point. This transformation was towards a fuller acknowledgement of the anachronistic tendencies of Western art history in the South African context: "The problem seems to lie in cherishing a concept of art history as removed rather than relevant ..." and towards a better understanding of the local context:

If we acknowledge that we work in the third world, we must surely try to adapt our discipline to a fresh purpose, and bridge the gap between the traditions of Western art history and art history as taught in South Africa today. Perhaps our subject does not exactly need to be Africanised, but it certainly needs to be contextualised (1987:90).

The need to contextualise was addressed by a number of initiatives cited by Rankin (1986:90-93): the formation of a lectureship in African art history in 1976 and new courses on traditional African art (proving to be more successful at third year level onwards); the incorporation of the immediate urban experience - the city of Johannesburg - as a focus for discussion, projects and comparative studies. This also facilitated a more practical approach to a traditionally literature-dependent discipline; incorporating new methodological approaches such as social and literary theory into traditional topics for undergraduates and methodological critiques at postgraduate level. Despite these, Rankin ends her appraisal on the following note: "There are still many questions to ask, many issues to debate" (1986:93).

Although significant initiatives and developments (such as those described above), art history in the 1970s in South Africa was, for the most part, and in comparison to the discipline abroad, hesitant to incorporate the 'radical' ideas of Marxist and feminist writers and activists for a number of reasons including the difficult political, academic and cultural climate. These new ideas, however, simmered within the art community at different levels mostly at the level of the works of art themselves, until the late 1980s when new publications such as Gavin Young's *Art of the South African Townships* (1988), Steven Sack's *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art* (1989), and Sue Williamson's *Resistance*

¹¹ *Teaching Art History in the Third World: Experiments at Wits* was presented at the third conference of the South African Association of Art Historians (1986). See bibliography for full reference.

Art (1990) signalled a more visibly changing field. In 1989, key figures in the discipline met at the Human Sciences Research Council in Pretoria to discuss, in detail, the new methodologies and the "New Art History" (Duffey 1996:5).

I have discussed, albeit briefly, the urgent socio-political climate in Europe from which the early Marxist-orientated social art history and feminist art history emerged. I have also noted some theoretical influences emerging from the Frankfurt school and within Marxist circles (often called critical theory). There seemed a strong political and social motivation behind the emergence or reinforcement of these approaches in their close affiliation to political activism, notably the feminist movement. I next turn to some of the theoretical influences emerging largely from linguistics, literary theory and philosophy. I do not intend to cast a dividing line between the approaches developed earlier and those still to come; they emerged simultaneously, for the most part, and drew from similar influences. Danto (1988), however, does draw such a distinction between a conservative 'new art history' and a radical one. In his understanding (bearing in mind that he made the distinction 18 years ago), the previously discussed approaches might be called conservative. Part of his reasoning is that these approaches were assimilated, "with little perturbations" into an older institutionalised approach (Danto 1988:532). A radical new art history' entailed a harsher critique of institutions from a more philosophic viewpoint.

In agreement with Danto's delineation, my view is that a critical postcolonial art history, necessarily adopts a poststructuralist preoccupation with the relationship between philosophy and language. The following discussion aims to detail this relation. It must be noted that I do not provide an extensive overview of the theoretical purview of the new art history but rather begin to focus on issues relating to the development of a localised theoretical framework.

12.2 THEORETICAL NEW

Structural linguistics as presented by Ferdinand de Saussure in his influential lectures and posthumously published *Cours de linguistique general* (1916) paved the way for early structuralism by renegotiating the 'tenuous' link between language and an external reality. Saussure distinguished between *longue* — the accepted rules governing language such as its syntactical and grammatical structure — and *parole*, or the individual utterance of everyday speech, in order to develop a framework for a linguistic science. For this purpose, his analysis focused on the former (*longue*), and the synchronic²⁵ relationship between language and

²⁵ Synchronic refers to language as it exists in a specific time and place as opposed to the changing (or diachronic) use of language.

reality. For Saussure, language as defined by its laws functions differentially, i.e. words have specific meaning because they are spelt and associated differently to other words: meaning is established in a system of differences. Further, the relationship between a signifier (sounded or written element) to that which it signifies (the conceptual element) is of an arbitrary nature, i.e. the word 'b-i-c-y-c-l-e' has no relationship (in its conception as a noun) to the thought/concept thereof

Although the example of the bicycle might seem banal, the idea that language mediates our external reality came to be of central importance to structuralist writers — a number of academics working in disciplines such as social/cultural anthropology, English and historical studies — who applied it to our social and cultural environment. Claude Levi-Strauss argued that both Western and allegedly 'primitive' cultures are equally determined by universal linguistic structures in his analysis of myths. Michel Foucault, in *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) interrogated the normalising function within Western language and discourse (and the imbalance of certain binary opposites in the system of differences) by analysing the societal construction of insanity and the institutions which originate and maintain the boundaries and categories relating to this term. Roland Barthes (1977), referring primarily to the differential nature of language, demonstrated the ubiquity of binary opposites in literature to a point beyond authorial intention. In this sense Barthes concurred with both Marxist and feminist objections to the stability of highly regarded (canonical) and authoritative texts and the notions of genius they supposedly exhibit. The relevance to this thesis is that this attempt establishes, as with 'deconstruction' to be later discussed, the limits of authorial agency and the classic notion of genius, and therefore the *distance* between an author and his/her 'text'.

The arbitrariness suggested by Saussure, however, occurs importantly on another level, viz. the fact that different cultures divide the world up in different ways²⁶ (linguistically, in structuralist thought). As Laurie Schneider Adams puts it, "language evolves according to its cultural context, rather than according to a priori concepts. In other words, language does not reflect reality; it constitutes reality" (1996:135). Martin Jay has extended this relativity to the visual realm. If vision is organised 'like a language' as Jay notes, "the universality of visual experience cannot be automatically assumed" (1993:9).

The 'science' of linguistics, initiated by Saussure, was to form part of a larger (all encompassing) science of the sign — semiology — of which the signifier and signified form a part. The application of this, combined with research into semiotics by Charles Sanders

²⁶ A popular example is the different way the colour spectrum is divided by different cultures. For example, in Chinese there is a term for a colour that encompasses both blue and green. Blue and green are considered shades of this third colour.

Peirce and Roman Jakobson, formed the foundation of a semiotic approach to art history. However, although initially indebted to Saussure, Peirce, Jakobson and the ensuing structuralism of Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Foucault, the semiotic approach developed largely as a result of poststructuralist interventions. These departed from, but also discarded, certain structuralist principles. If structuralism instituted a 'universal proposition regarding language and the formation of societal structures and institutions, poststructuralism rejected such essentialism. The application of the 'techniques' of textual analysis and 'deconstruction' proposed by writers such as Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, by (most notably) feminist and postcolonial writers, instituted a harsh and sustained critique of the foundations of Western society and resulted in a strong message of cultural relativity (although often misconstrued).

Therefore, the adoption of poststructuralist views in a semiotic approach to art history was, firstly, an acknowledgement of the 'textual' nature of society (and thus a conceptualisation of the workings of the sign in an) and, secondly, these ideas promoted a reflexive and culturally relative stance, which presented a stark opposition to formalist approaches at the time. In sum, according to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, who adopted a semiotic approach in the writing, this 'newness' in art history is located in:

... the polysemy of meaning; the problematics of authorship, context, and reception; the implications of the study of narrative for the study of images; the issue of sexual difference in relation to verbal and visual signs; and the claims to truth of interpretation. In all these areas, semiotics challenges the positivist view of knowledge (Bal and Bryson 1991:242).

1.2.3 THE CRITIQUE OF GRAND NARRATIVES

The theoretical ideas I turn to now, centre on the multi-faceted critique of grand/master narratives. Following postmodern theories that converge on the relationship between language and reality (as previously discussed), the focus of criticism towards the historical project was on the event and the narration or record thereof— the *interpretive distances*.

Lyotard, in *La Condition Postmoderne* (1979), claimed that master narratives were in a state of crisis. The unity and organising structure of Hegelian, Kantian and Marxist narratives were viewed with unprecedented skepticism aimed, largely, at the totalising explanations which modernism, founded on these master narratives, proposed (Butler 2002). Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) pointed to a similar crisis by implicating Western grand narratives in a problematic power-relationship, instantiating the 'Other'. Of such historical writings, the foremost post-structuralist view is that description, as a form of interpretation, is problematic at its core (Melville 1998). Historical studies, grounded in the empiricism institutionalised by Leopold von Ranke, received persistent criticism for claims at objectivity in its *interpretation*

of historical sources. By extension, as Stephen Bann (1986) suggests, these criticisms are equally directed towards art historical studies." In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1966), Foucault argues against the perception of a unified historical process that can be clearly discerned, objectively described and to a degree predicted. This teleological view of historical progress, in line with Hegel, relied on causal relationships and continuity of event. What Foucault and others propose is that the new history should, "... recognise the importance of discontinuity, and acknowledge ... that establishing discontinuity in the past is a 'deliberate operation on the part of the historian— (Curthoys & Docker 2006:182).

Therefore, according to these critiques, the Science' of history — seen as problematic interpretation — is in need of a wide range of disclaimers regarding: claims to facticity, assumptions evident in the collection and presentation of source material, and most importantly the implications of authorial intervention. White (1973) reinforced this in his suggestion that history, as the name suggests, is a narrative comprising all the tropes, metaphors and authorial biases that a novel might display" He does, however, acknowledge that history, unlike fiction, is orientated *towards* the truth. Deconstruction intends to 'read' this orientation in a new light.

1.2.4 SUBVERSIVE READING: DECONSTRUCTION AS INTERPRETIVE STRATEGY

The interrogation of the assumptions embedded in historical master-narratives is a task requiring a measure of reflexivity if it is to be done within the limits (the language) of academia in the Western tradition of analytic argumentation. As this is the task of postcolonial theorists (and art historians like Lize van Robbroeck, discussed in the following chapter), it is perhaps not surprising that one of the principal theoretical groundings chosen is that of Deconstruction, an approach that proposes a radically new conception of writing!" A central aspect of Jacques Derrida's broader project is that of exposing the disaggregation between an author's intention and the subsequent communicative act (in its various forms) chosen to express it, particularly in the history of Western metaphysics. It is the little noticed often disguised and contradictory statements that are extracted to show that tensions already exist to undermine the stability of authorial meaning within a 'text. Derrida has shown that Western metaphysics, in his understanding of this tradition, is predicated on an orientation

:' "There can be no new art history', revolutionary or not, except to the extent that it participates in a 'new history' (1986:28).

"[Historical] narratives .. axe verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those m the Sciences"(Hayden White 2001:1713)

Associated with Jacques Derrida (see *Signature, Event, Context*, 1988) the term arche-writing is conceived (or Implicated) as a result of the observation that written and spoken words are equally iterable and similarly break with the possibility of a pure authorial intention and presence. Oral communication can function in the absence of authorial intention (e.g. speaking carelessly) or in the absence of an intended receiver (e.g. overhearing a conversation), just as in writing (Derrida 1988).

towards the truth. As with many of the binary associations upholding this tradition, truth belongs in the favored category along with the first term in the following examples: presence/absence, speech/writing, normal/deviant and civilised/uncivilised amongst many others. Derrida proceeds to highlight the contamination and instability inherent in such hierarchisations in Western (Eurocentric) thought. That this occurs beyond an author's intention (if this is ever knowable) raises questions of agency.

A related question is how to move beyond these inherent power relationships? VY Mudimbe has asked if there can be anthropology or, by extension, art history without Eurocentricism.

.. at seems impossible to imagine an anthropology without a Western epistemological link. For on the one hand, it cannot be completely cut off from the field of its epistemological genesis and from its roots; and, on the other hand, as a science, it depends upon a precise frame without which there is no science at all, nor any anthropology (1988:19).

By looking to the inadequacies within the history of the discipline of art history by, for example, critiquing nineteenth and early twentieth century Eurocentricism — and the 'science' or 'truth' behind its approach — theorists incorporating poststructuralist methods thus pose the question for future enquiry (in line with Mudimbe's challenge): what are the terms that will constitute a re-writing or new writing of art history, and what is its relationship to the past?

The theoretical ideas I have cited are connected by a desire to question the authority of canonical Western philosophical and historical texts. A central argument is that these texts maintain a Eurocentric position under scientific pretenses. I focus on the implications of this for African studies in chapter 2. They also question the role of language in perpetuating this Eurocentricism and seek alternative, subversive strategies for re-reading and re-writing.

My view concurs, in part, with a perceived skepticism in the ideas discussed above: a) towards the traditional historical project and its 'objective' pretences b) towards the stability of authorial intention and c) about the nature of authorial agency. But it raises further questions regarding the imposition of Western models of writing history in a South African and African context — an *anachronistic distance*. I advance the idea that 'distance', in its various manifestations, can shed light on the implications of this imposition and lead to an acknowledgement of certain contingencies in our understanding of early African modernism.

1.3 DISTANCE AS A HEURISTIC

In the chapter thus far, I have outlined certain critiques of 'traditional' models of art history, as well as the incorporation of new theoretical developments in the discipline. In other words, I have attempted to map out the state of play in current art historiography. In this I have recognised and located instances of distance as a recurring theme: firstly, distance is evident in Western traditions of depicting space such as in the quests for mimesis and true perspective; secondly, there is distance between Eurocentric art historical narratives and the excluded or essentialised 'Other': thirdly, distance is evident in the space between art historical interpretations and the subjects of its study — a hermeneutic distance. As a way of organising my approach to African modernism and specifically to one artist's 'subversive' strategies in the chapters to come, I now propose 'distance' as a heuristic. 'Distance' encompasses these various instances (in visual conventions and interpretive strategies) and also facilitates the explication of my understanding of African modernism, Ernest Mancoba and the writings that seek to interpret him. I suggest that 'distance' is useful for considering artistic production outside of the traditional centres of artistic activity — by artists excluded or 'written out' of historical narratives in the past or those written into art history in a reductive way. It is a category conceived in full acknowledgment of the distance from certain subjects inherent in interpretations of the past, as well as the rationale for a particular amount of distance in redressive accounts?

Further, by interrogating the trope of distance in its various metaphorical and literal manifestations in past South African art historiographical traditions, I participate in a broader trend to dismantle the grip of a dominant Western approach to the study of people following postcolonial critiques of ethnocentric observation. I suggest that the 'deconstruction of a most pressing instance of distance, the notion of 'Othering', requires both a measure of the destruction of the institution of art history and a measure of re-writing (retrieval) from within its reach.' This thesis is thus an exercise in writing, for the language I employ is steeped in the history of its use.³² I hope to touch on some of these complexities in the pages that follow: elaborating and dismantling the ever-present language of distance. I present three distinct areas of distance related to African modernism and Ernest Mancoba discussed in the later chapters: the ownership of depicted distance, distant makers and interpretive distance.

³² The need to oppose dominant Eurocentric accounts of history with 'balancing' versions. The danger of essentialism (under the guise of redress), I suggest, is the potential for complex factors to be omitted or de-emphasised in order to highlight others.

Heidegger's use of the term 'deconstruction' implied both a destruction and a retrieval (D'Alleva, 2005)

Regarding modernism, Jameson succinctly puts it: "... perhaps it might be better to admit that the notions that cluster around the word 'modern' are as unavoidable as they are unacceptable" (2002:113):

It is necessary to disclaim that there is much left outside of my selective use of distance³ specifically with regards to the conventions of depicting distance. In limiting the scope of this study, I present depicted distance mainly in the light of certain Western painting traditions such as mimesis, perspective, modernism and abstraction since Ernest Mancoba specifically engages and speaks to these narratives.

1.3.1. THE OWNERSHIP OF DEPICTED DISTANCE

It is within the context of challenges directed at art historical narratives that uphold selective traditions of depicted distance, that the 'contribution' of black African modernist art production is to be located.

The theorisation of the depiction of space forms a core narrative in Western art history: from the trajectory of mimesis and perspective to the subsequent breakdown in the modernist period. Wilde (2002) and Alpers, cited previously, have commented on the formative role of Leon Battista Alberti's *Treatise on Painting* (1435), for the emergence of "what subsequently became dignified as Fine Art, but also a continuing source of the elevated cultural status of art" (2002:4). Alberti's humanistic ambitions for raising the intellectual integrity of an practice and social status are noted in his attitude that representative art can "... 'make the absent present ... [and] represent the dead to the living, or even further piety through representations of the Gods" (Wilde 2002:6). Alberti further delineates the relationship between the beauty in crafts and in painting as a subservient one: that the painter leads the way through *his* access to higher intellectual principles (e.g. harmony through proportion). Most importantly, Alberti's treatise influenced a tradition of the theorisation of pictorial space and distance by elucidating perspectival geometry and, in its achievement, harmony, with notions such as point, line and plane (Wilde 2002).

Without tracing the full evidence of Alberti's legacy in Western art history (which is beyond the scope of this essay), suffice it to say, that from 'Alberti's Window', a connection between the attainment of realistic representation through knowledge and 'theory' and the search for moral and aesthetic harmony was initiated. In sweeping terms, modernism can be understood as a reaction to the long standing tradition of pictured distance: from the impressionist reliance on perception *over* theory, on the one hand, to the complete breakdown of perspectival conventions in cubism on the other. In the latter, the undoubted significance of African art is to be acknowledged. It is also to this tradition that Cobra and Mancoba, discussed in chapter 3, present themselves.

³ I regretfully do not consider oriental art in my conception of distance and understanding of 'Centre'—'Other' relationships.

Since the narratives of depicted distance found a home in Europe, representative forms of distance in other parts of the world were viewed as secondary. Van Robbroeck's thesis, to be discussed in chapter 2, reveals the evolutionary associations with the claims over depicted distance which perpetuated the modern/tradition divide:

Since Western civilisation was assumed to be the most advanced, and naturalism was the style of Europe's 'maturity', it was accepted that geometric, stylised or abstract art signified an earlier stage of cultural development (2006:84)

Regarding Eurocentricism in the traditions of depicted distance, I ask two questions: *who* has chimed ownership of this tradition? and, *who* has the right to depart from it? In chapter 2, I discuss how the 'Centre' defined itself against an 'Other' in terms of the ownership of modernist contraventions of this tradition. The Western attitude emerged particularly strongly when it came to dealing with the African artist who specialised in Western artistic forms. These artists were often seen as mimickers or as working with a foreign tradition, often being denied recognition or further training.

However, the demonstration of the mastery of Western art forms has been seen in a different light. Olu Oguibe (2002) has argued that one strategy of resistance by early black African modernists was to master Western forms and techniques and thus present the illogical nature of a pervasive colonial us/them discourse. Here, South African artists' Gerard Benghu and John Mohl are examples of black artists who mastered pre-modernist techniques, despite lack of training and support.' Regarding modernism, both Gerard Sekoto and Ernest Mancoba in South Africa presented an anomaly to the exclusivity of modernist intentions in the arts by participating at important avant-garde levels of modernist painting in Europe. Further, Aina Onabolu, painting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Lagos, and who became known as 'Mr. Perspective', reminds us that realism in art was not an exclusively Western heritage: despite contest over the demarcation of Africa, i.e. where to locate the Egyptian and Northern traditions, We court an, it can be argued, formed basis for a modern artistic idiom in Africa based on the tradition of realistic representation (Oguibe 2002).

1.3.2 DISTANT MAKERS

Art has historically been used as a measure for civilization and progress. It has been construed in this way, i.e. as a universal category, without full understanding of the motivation and forms of art produced outside of Western centres — as evidenced by the paucity of critical

John Mohl (1903-1985), although studying in Germany, was advised not to continue with landscape painting but rather to concentrate on depictions of 'his own people. His response was clear: But I am an Africa, and when God made Africa, he also created beautiful Landscapes for Africans to admire and paint" (cited in Martin 2002:207). Gerard Bhengu (1910-1990) was refused access to formal training at a Technical college and was encouraged not to go overseas (Miles 1997).

material on African and Oriental art in Western art history texts prior to 1980. The geographical boundaries evident in the history of Western art defined the centre of the avant-garde, and relegated art from the periphery as second-rate or not-quite-civilised'. In this hierarchisation, skin colour was used as a marker. South Africa, as an ex-colony and where white artists were often up to date with European trends, presented difficulty in this regard: as not an exclusive territory of the 'Other'. As both a white colony and later white state, black artists were excluded from any avant-garde association that befitted white artists. In South African art history a clear distinction between a white modernist idiom and a black one continues to be drawn, and early black modernist art is treated in a different light under the title 'pioneer African modernism'." The central critique of postcolonial approaches to art history is that the categories of art (and all that is excluded) are predicated on racial and geographic assumptions regarding the 'Other'. This forms the background to discussions of early black African modernists who actively closed this *geographic distance* and by doing so challenged the ideological one. What is frequently suggested (Oguibe 2002, 2005), however, is that African art should not be considered against a Western 'norm', for which the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition has been criticized,¹ but rather a conceptualisation of Africa's own unique movement towards a modern expression which becomes apparent in the act of physically transgressing distance and opposing received or stereotyped conceptions of artists outside of Western geographic and ideological boundaries, is needed. Why, for instance, is the early modernist appropriation of African art not seen in the same way by the reverse appropriation of European forms?

1.3.3 HERMENEUTIC/INTERPRETIVE DISTANCES

Kant's notion of the disinterested spectator formed a central element of a scientific approach to aesthetics and art history developed during the Enlightenment. Such scientific presupposition, in the wake of largely continental criticism over the past fifty years, has been dismantled in favour of new art objects and makers being admitted into the categories of art, hence a more relativised approach. Apart from exposing inadequacies in past accounts, they have also widened the scope of future interpretations by interrogating the role of the author/viewer. In relation to Africa, two central questions regarding historical interpretation emerge. Firstly, how much can theorists or historians know about the complex interaction of subjectivities involved during the colonial and apartheid period? Secondly, what should the role of art history be in redressing inadequate accounts of African art in the past?

¹Implicit in the usage of 'African' in 'pioneer African art' in a large majority of texts on African modernism is the exclusion of white artists as producers of African art. In *An Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century* (2002), Irma Stern's painting *The Golden Shawl* (1945) is incorrectly titled *The Ancestor* by Ernest Mancoba (1940), and vice versa (page 204 and 211): an accident that signals both the times and the changes that need to occur.

See Hans Belting (2006:68-72) for a discussion on some of the anachronisms and awkward juxtapositions in the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* (1987).

In the task of a) uncovering complexities, or b) disguising them (under the rationale of redress) the notion of 'distance' becomes central. For the former, the political and ideological positions of writers of the past need to be 'deconstructed' (discussed in chapter 2). From this critical analysis, certain assumptions and allegiances emerge in the Eurocentric nature of the discipline — imposing distance between the 'Centre' and the 'Other'. In the case of the latter, distance is enacted by partiality, by emphasising certain aspects of an artist or group of artists historical circumstance and discarding or downplaying others. Distance, in this instance is forged between the artist and the interpretation, often for political motivation. The question is whether this distance is justifiable?

My thesis does not speak definitively to this latter (pressing) issue, rather pointing to it as an instance of distance through selective interpretation. Nonetheless, from the perspective of an artist, my view is that essentialised and politicised historical accounts do an injustice to the integrity (or ambiguity) of the artist. With reference to black South African modernism, the implications of the following examples need to be understood within the complex interactions between artists, educators and the market, as well as in view of the artist as survivor, strategist and competitor: Cecil Skotnes, who albeit with the best of intentions, limited the technical training offered at Polly Street for fear of tainting an 'authentic' African expression; John Mohl who warned Gerard Sekoto against going to France as "he would be cutting himself off from his sources of inspiration" (Couzens cited in Miles 1996:80); or, ironically, Sekoto who discouraged Pemba from using watercolours as "too delicate" and "English" a medium (Martin 2002:208-209).

I suggest that the complex terrain of African modernism is better understood by looking at the multiple interactions of subjectivities involved. Broader interpretation of African art of this period (roughly between 1920 and 1960) — i.e. attempting to delineate an African modernist movement — needs to deal with the contingencies and contradictions that emerge from individual accounts. They also need to include the position of the author of this history: what does the author bring to the subject and vice versa? — what politics? what poetics? Hermeneutics, as an approach to art history, is seen by this author as less of a path to truth and fact, but as a realisation of the inconclusive nature of interpretation as well as a consideration of situation of the author him/herself. In the third chapter of this thesis, I invoke the image of the hermeneutic circle to describe the common endeavour of attempting to understand the complex nature of early African modernism and the differing authorial positions. The hermeneutic circle suggests that understanding begins somewhere *around the subject*.

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has found, the history of Western art has been severely critiqued over the past thirty years in relation to its philosophical and empirical foundations and to certain people and kinds of art that have traditionally been excluded from its purview. I suggest that these critiques inform, in a critical way, current debate about African art, specifically those related to modernism. This is evidenced by the work of the South African art historian Lize van Robbroeck, whose doctoral contribution is discussed in the following chapter. Her work on the foundations of the modernist paradigm using various 'new' theoretical approaches has considered its implications in white writings on black artists in South Africa.

I have also established the sense in which I will be using 'distance' in the final chapter: firstly as a way of describing the work of Ernest Mancoba in relation to the claims of ownership of the Western tradition of depicted distance; secondly, to indicate his unique transgression of geographic and ideological distances; and lastly to describe the nature of the interpretations of his life and work in light of recent criticism and a perceived political motivation. In the following chapter I intend to build on an instance of 'distance' that I have chosen to emphasise in this thesis by looking at the modernist reinforcement of distance through 'Lathering'.

CHAPTER 2

MODERNIST WRITING, DISTANT READING

INTRODUCTION

The core finding of Lize van Robbroeck's doctoral thesis, *Writing White on Black: Modernism as Discursive Paradigm in South African Writing on Modern Black Art* (2006), is that a large majority of white writings about black South African art and artists of the 20th century reveal an allegiance to a Western modernist episteme rooted in Enlightenment and positivist philosophies, as well as to shifts in the empirical sciences, notably anthropology. The resultant forms in which these ideas are manifested in the South African context³⁷ are shown to perpetuate racialised assumptions relating to black African cultural production implicating a process of 'Othering', or the construction of alterity *through distance*.

This chapter elaborates the particular instance of distance noted above — 'Othering' — through a background discussion of modernism and Eurocentricism following aspects of Van Robbroeck's thesis. I draw from her discussion of a) the foundations and developments of a Western modernist episteme, and b) the specific paradoxes regarding the 'Other' at the heart of modernist informed institutions of art in South Africa. The latter enquiry entails an appraisal of the imposition of art historical categories that serve to maintain distance from artists and societies that are either deemed uncivilised — 'not yet modern' — or as 'Other' in an exoticised sense, and generalised as partaking in an essential African 'essence'. Moreover, this chapter serves to contextualise the interpretations of Ernest Mancoba's life and art which are considered in chapter 3. To conclude this chapter I focus on the concept of singularity, also raised (as an appeal) in Van Robbroeck's dissertation. This is to inform my recommendations in the conclusion to this thesis.

My interest in including a discussion of aspects of Van Robbroeck's thesis as part of the subject of my own is inspired by the content (African modernism(s) and positivist criticism),

³⁷ canonical art history texts, school and university syllabi as well as common exhibition practices, for example.

the 'techniques' Van Robbroeck adopts as well as her self-reflexive and confrontational stance:

... a desperate revision or re-writing was needed to dislodge a paradigm that had moulded and shaped me, but that could no longer be practically supported or ethically entertained (Van Robbroeck 2006:5).

After chapter 1, my task is also to assess the poststructuralist contribution to the practice of an history in South Africa vis-a-vis Van Robbroeck's thesis. Her poststructuralist critique of historical writings on black African artists represents a significant contribution to critical accounts of art history in the post-apartheid/postcolonial context.³⁸ This is achieved by 'deconstructing' apartheid-styled modernist and educationist discourses, using poststructuralist 'tools of textual analysis and ideology critique to draw out inherent assumptions, contradictions and aporias.

Van Robbroeck emphasises that her project demonstrates an interrogation of "... the rhetoric of truth claims in modernist discourse" and also "partakes of a general postmodern shift from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language" (2006:16)³⁹. Therefore, her undertaking to uncover the embedded strategies of certain white writings that categorise the 'Other' is both political and philosophical. Her analysis draws on criticism that goes to the heart of Western tendencies to control the representation of others through ideology, the market and language. Its political slant is current as representations of this kind persist in syllabi, exhibitions and in writings both locally and abroad.

By elaborating Foucault's conception of discourse⁴⁰ and episteme, Van Robbroeck draws attention to the tug of power and ideology at work within the performative texts of a dominant modernist narrative. As mentioned earlier regarding the deconstructive project, a central characteristic of the modernist undertaking (and Western metaphysics, in line with Derrida) is an orientation towards 'truth'. Reading from Foucault, Van Robbroeck explains:

These 'regimes of truth' not only determine which discourses are accepted as true, but also the mechanisms which enable subjects to distinguish 'truth' from 'falsehood',

This, however, does not negate the early impact of a more Marxist oriented social art history. However, I propose that Van Robbroeck's thesis represents an innovative approach to the field of African modernism that draws less on Marxist critiques and more on Continental literary theory.

³⁸ Van Robbroeck draws significantly on the pioneering work of Professor Johann Degenaar whose 1987 paper *Writing and Re-Writing* (presented at the 3rd conference of the South African Association of Art Historians in Stellenbosch) highlighted Deconstruction and the necessity to re-write a "new an history" (1987:15). Van Robbroeck's central thesis, in my view, departs particularly from Degenaar's third suggestion of issues to be addressed for such an undertaking: "The extent to which the white mythology of Western man has been projected onto the South African world of art and the manner in which its history has been constructed" (Degenaar 1987:115).

³⁹ Foucault's understanding of discourse is linked to the maintenance of power and dominance. See Van Robbroeck 2006, pages 20-24.

provide the means to sanction 'truth', and ascribe the status of those who are deemed purveyors of 'truth' (2006: 21-22).

If my understanding is correct, the writers whose work Van Robbroeck deconstructs are positioned within certain 'limits' of the discursive paradigm they occupy. This, in turn, draws attention to questions of agency and ideology: what are the limits of the authorial voice? Is there perhaps, in attempting to read the general from the specific, i.e. broader Eurocentric modernist characteristics from specific white writings on black South African artists, a hint of deferred responsibility? Or are historians and theorists inevitably bound to speak the ideology, the 'paradigmatic opinions' of their historical moment?"

With these questions of agency in mind, I discuss the 'construction' of Western styled modernism from which such notions of reflexivity arguably originate. It is against this backdrop of agency that Ernest Mancoba's transgressions of distance are to be understood in the following chapter. It further underscores the relevance of the notion of interpretive distance which seeks to describe the distance between: a) authors and the artistic gesture, and b) the distance created between differing authorial voices.

2.1 MODERNITY/MODERNISMS

Van Robbroeck provides an extensive historical account of the formation of the modernist paradigm, elaborating on notions like empiricism, rationality, Enlightenment and progress as constitutive of the modernist foundations of early twentieth century art writing. She also locates in this history certain ambiguities and aporias (Ernest Mancoba who is discussed in chapter 3 represents in my view, an embodiment of some of these contradictions). To proceed to a discussion of the nature of these paradoxes it is necessary to sketch some of the key ideas behind the formation of the modernist paradigm and the liminal spaces that result from the tendency to categorise. The following section briefly conceptualises a philosophical connection between empiricism, progress, and the resultant Eurocentricism as enacted by the colonial project. From this I proceed to discuss the emergence of the Western conception of the 'modern' and its multiple implications regarding distance and the 'Other'. It is to be noted that in the following section I employ an argument relating to the background and implication of European modernism informed not only by Van Robbroeck but also by Jameson, Oguibe, Mudimbe, Perry and Wood, amongst others. I draw specifically on Van

Althusser maintains that the subject reproduces ideology, it is internal and hence our utterances (and [thoughts and actions]) are restricted by citationality. (D'Alleva 2005). This was argued in his influential work: *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation* (1971)

Robbroeck's analytical structure when connecting this history to colonial and apartheid styled writings in South Africa.

2.1.1 SOME PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

Empiricism denotes a way of thinking about knowledge and refers to a tradition of empirical philosophy⁴² and science. These claimed that all that can be known about the world is derived from our senses. Whilst suggesting the possibility of a complete science, empiricism failed to explain the ethical or transcendental, those aspects left outside its frame of reference. On the other hand, *rationality* (the alter ego of empiricism) proposed precisely the notion of a transcendental knowledge (after Descartes). This unknown (invisible or insensible) faculty was then used to organise empirical material. Science and mathematics, for example, were used to demonstrate such universal truths beyond the empirical realm (Phillips, 2000).

During the Enlightenment, influential philosophers such as Kant and Rousseau linked empiricism and rationality to notions of individuality and freedom. *Freedom* suggested a return to the 'original' state, as in the Kantian statement: "Freedom from Man's self-incurred tutelage ..." (Phillips 2000:73). Paradoxically, this new 'humanistic' philosophy occurred at the height of the slave trade (Van Robbroeck 2006). It is also to be noted that these philosophies promoted man at the centre of unfolding his world, to "intervene instrumentally in the process of his own history" (Phillips 2000:73). Man is hence free to explore his universe under the pretence of scientism. Phillips notes the conflict of interest:

So on the one hand, freedom and science march forward together; but, on the other, they are fundamentally opposed because where science is concerned with uncovering unchanging necessary truths, freedom concerns man's intervention in a world considered in terms of absolute unpredictable contingency (2000:74).

From rationality and science emerges the concept of *progress* central to the colonial project. Progress named the journey to an imagined fate or destiny combining empiricism, rationality and individual agency. If empiricism advocated a total state of knowledge, the Enlightenment made this attainable by rational development and individual action. It is in these foundations, of an empirical search for 'truth' through reason and progress, that certain ambiguities are located within the modernist objective.

2.1.2 THE MODERN

Demarcating the nature, not to mention the beginning and ending, of the modern period, is a complex task. By way of the origins of Western modernism, some locate events in the early

⁴² Locke, Hume, Mills (all British) are philosophers commonly associated with empiricism,

1600s whilst others point to the Renaissance (itself a contested time). In terms of containment, some situate the postmodern as marking the end, and others speak of continuation into a late modern phase. Despite such uncertainty, several dominant characteristics of the modern, in the Western sense, have been distilled from early associations: the word itself, as Jameson (2002) discusses, carries the weight of sixteen centuries of adopted connotation. Jameson suggests that a formative association arises from the time after the conquest of Rome by the Goths. Here, *Modernus* in the writing of the literary scholar Cassidorus, acquired an antithesis in the term *antiques* (Jameson 2002:17). For Jameson this is a distinctive development in meaning that continues to influence current usage. Where previous usage simply designated temporal categories and implied "no particular privilege for the present", this new sense signified "a fundamental dividing line between a classical culture and a present whose historic task lies in reinventing that culture" (*ibis!*). This in turn attributed a deictic quality to the word modern." 'Modern' becomes a wholly modifiable term bearing an interesting relationship to the term *novus* (new) by suggesting a uniquely modifiable category.

The associations of modernism, as an artistic period in Western art, can be located in the above distinction. Within Hegel's teleological shadow, modernism in art - ~~twentieth-century~~ Western art or 'modern art' - has been defined in terms of successive formal/conceptual breaks with previous represented forms. In the development of an autonomous aesthetic/poetic trajectory for art, a project developed in the early 1900s by the Russian Formalists,⁴⁴ modernism has been historically situated within the above mentioned Enlightenment-informed philosophies of individual freedom, progress and newness. From this background emerges a concept of "The Artist: autonomous and individualistic and concerned with new knowledge and new forms. This description is further extended, partly by the formation of the classic art historical canon (see Chapter 1) and the enduring stretch of a male dominant art history since the Renaissance, as well as by skewed social Darwinist views, prevalent in the twentieth century, to the artist as both white and male. As Perry and Wood confirm, this concept of the artist points directly toward the rhetoric of modernism:

... the autonomy of its subject, the disinterestedness of *his* taste, the presumed authenticity of subjective feeling and so on" (2004: 20).

⁴ Jameson (citing Jespertson) refers to this quality as "shifting" (Jameson 2002:17).

Victor Schlovsky's influential essay, *An as Technique* (published in 1912), introduced the notion of 'defamiliarisation' (*ostranenie*) which operated as both a goal of and measure for the degree of work of literature. The defamiliarised (or foregrounded) poetic device such as ^{as} repetition or long descriptive passages, amongst others, was *seen* to make the habitual appear strange, as if never perceived before. What results is the slowing down of the act of perception as the reader negotiates this new feature. This is opposed to the act of 'automatised' or habitual appreciation of art. Schlovsky writes, "...the process of perception is an aesthetic *emi* in itself and tuust be prolonged" (cited in Lemon and Reis 1965:12). From this emerged a topology for advancement in the arts, a way of mapping new devices for making things 'strange'.

Following this Western understanding of the modern and modernism in an, how are we to approach modernism in Africa?

Since colonialism affected the spread of a dominant Western worldview, a common perception is that modernity in the postcolony is to be understood as a multitude of reactions to this. Atwell argues that although notions of autonomy and individual rights have shown up in many cultures independently of those of the West, it is the force with which the post-Enlightenment idioscape has been imposed on the world over the last 300 years [that has] ensured that most societies have now come to define themselves in *relation to it*" (cited in Richards 2006:69, my *emphasis*). Masilela (2006) draws further attention to the difference between European routes to modernity and African ones:

... whereas the making of modernity in European history was a violent process of secularisation from the Reformation through the Enlightenment to the French Revolution, in African history it was a violent process of proselytising and conversion into Christianity: in one experience, modernity is a secular eventuation, in the other, it is inseparable from acculturation and religiosity (2006:31).

Hence, if modernity in Africa is understood in terms of an engagement with the missionary and colonial 'reality' of the 20th and 21st centuries — the socio-political-economic effects and after effects of colonialism — then modernism (in art historical terms) is a notion that encompasses changes and similarities in the expression of this experience. This proposition is open to the plurality of experiences of domination and modes of response — or modernisms.

To summarise, *Eurocentricism*⁴⁵ has been historically defined (and constantly reinforced) in terms of modernity by notions of 1) locality: modernization began in Europe and it remains (along with America) its centre, and 2) ontology: the development of the free-willed individual in the history of Western metaphysics (e.g. Descartes, Kant and Sartre) leading to current 'prototypical' models of (neo) liberal democratic and 'modern' political systems. The concern of this thesis is the effect of these positions as *status quo*. I turn now to Western dealings with the 'Other' measured against the above normative positions. I seek in the following a closer investigation of aspects of Van Robbroeck's thesis.

2.1.3 LIMINAL SPACES 1: TWO WORLDS AND BEING EN-ROUTE

As art and aesthetics constituted a high point in civilisation's achievement, these began to embody the "unbridgeable distance between savagery and culture" (Oguibe 2002:244).

⁴⁵ Eurocentricism and 'The West' refers to both Western Europe and the United States of America in this thesis.

Van Robbroeck notes the implications of the Eurocentric conception of modernity, detailed in the previous section, for an African one:

In the universal progressive route that all societies were programmed to follow, it was taken for granted that Western Europe formed the vanguard. For Hegel, Europe constituted "the absolute end of history", while Africa, due to its purported isolation from world events and under the influence of its turgid climate, remained caught in a pre-historic time before time (2006:50).

Drawing from 3/Y Mudimbe, Van Robbroeck further recalls historically opposing myths regarding Africa during Enlightenment formation. One is the Hobbesian image of pre-European savage Africa "in which there was no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continued fear, and danger of violent death" (Hodgkin cited in Mudimbe 1988:1). The other, "Rousseauian" image of the golden age of Africa, perfect, untainted "liberty, equality and fraternity" (*ibid*). Africa is cast in a timeless, liminal space — between two worlds. This is the difficult and pervasive imagery and stereotyping that have informed modern/traditional distinctions in the arts in the past, specifically when attempts are made to delineate a modern idiom outside of Western centres of reference. These early art history texts, as Van Robbroeck's thesis so clearly demonstrates, fall into the above reductive myths about Africa and its artists. Nettleton (1987:163) cites an early observation by William Burchell as encapsulating "[the] appeal of the exotic, but the romantic wonder shown at the achievement despite the primitiveness of the means' in the following comment on Tlaping spoons:

The figures of the spoons are given principally with the view of exhibiting in what degree the Bachpins are possessed of ornamental taste. The grace of these decorations is evident, and of some, the elegance of turn is not surpassed in the works of more polished nation⁴⁷

The inherent implication of modernization (for those outside of its 'centres') i.e. that certain people are deemed 'en-route', can be traced to early formulations of modernization theory' ^s (Knöbl 2002). Knob! (2006:160) outlines some of the early assumptions informing this theory of the social sciences: a) modernisation is an irreversible universal process (which began in 18th and 19th century Europe); b) isolated societies can be looked at, through the

For in-depth research on this theme see Annitra Nettleton, *Implications of the Tenn "Primitive" in Relation to African Sculpture* (1973), particularly her image of a child to parent relationship between black Africans and colonial whites.

This quote is from Burchell, W *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa*, London 1881 (vol. 1) in a section titled "Bachpin [sic] taste - progress of civilisation" (cited in Nettleton 1987:163).

"Developing from socio-cultural evolutionary theories, modernisation theory (sometimes known as development theory) focuses on the socio-economic impact of the developed world in 'modernising' underdeveloped nations. The implications of this theory have been seen in both negative and positive ways (Knobl 2002:158-178).

lens of structural functionalism," as coherent and relatively hermetic objects of study; c) modernisation as a historical process entails a shift from a traditional to a modern society, is the product of efforts by the elite and educated, and occurs in uniform and linear ways.

The above assumptions, informing early modernization theory within the social sciences, did not significantly change until the 1970s but rather received reinforcement by evolutionary accounts of social and political change. Influenced by Talcott Parsons,⁵⁰ modernization theory adopted the view that a capitalist economy and democratic systems of governance were to be taken as "evolutionary universals" (Knob) 2002:161) and all 'Others', from this frame of reference, are to be understood as in-transit.

To recapitulate, in this chapter I have attempted to elaborate a particular sense of 'distance' — Othering - identified as resulting from Enlightenment-informed colonial practices in Africa as detailed in Lize van Robbroeck's thesis. In this section I have detailed, and continue to detail, a dominant nineteenth-century Western view of the 'primitive' African as being en-

Continuing with this project, Van Robbroeck notes the implications of scientific and classificatory tendencies⁵² of the modernist paradigm entrenched during the Enlightenment. Tracing the epistemic routes of this drive to be objective, Reiss (cited in Van Robbroeck) uses the metaphor of the telescope to describe the 'analytico-referential' aspect, which "... distances the viewer from the world, thus creating a duality between the 'knower' as subject, and the world as object. The world is represented as a passive, inert object of knowledge, and science as the only 'true' instrument of knowing" (2006:34, my *emphasis*). 'Distance' is created through scientific taxonomy "where names suggest a place in a systematised, artificial hierarchical grid" (Van Robbroeck 2006:36-7). This is then used to promote objectivity:

... positivist discourse appropriates the 'rationality' of science, and claims objectivity by adopting the 'externalise view of the scientific observer" (Van Robbroeck 2006:37). My

⁵² In anthropology, structural functionalism refers to the view (largely discarded) that societies are coherent and bounded constructs which can be likened to an organism. The social structures and the various constituent parts are emphasised.

Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) was an American sociologist whose work on agency and structure was influential in the development of structural functionalism.

In the fields of the arts, as Nettleton (1987:164) notes: "Opinion was always divided in the nineteenth century as to which group among the South African population was more or less 'artistic'. This comparative approach to the 'aesthetic advancement' of the 'primitive' is present in the following art history text by Bryant in 1949:

"The Zulus are no great shakes at wood carving. They had a perfect eye for symmetry, as was manifest in their pottery: but being naturally deficient in artistic (or indeed in any other) imagination or inventive power, their work always lacked decorative embellishment, and so was by no means comparable with the multifarious artistic products of the East African and central Bantu craftsmen" (cited in Nettleton 1987: 165).

Here, Van Robbroeck refers to Foucault who examined the history of taxonomic practices. In his study he cites Linnaeus's *System Naturae* (1735) which epitomises the classification of Homo-sapiens into Europeans, Asiatics, Americans all differing by physical and temperamental traits (Van Robbroeck 2006).

view concurs with Van Robbroeck's — that the 'scientifically' informed rhetoric of colonialism resulted in bracketing the 'Other' as an object to be studied and as wholly different.

Van Robbroeck speaks of this categorisation as a colonial strategy to deny the achievement of early black modernists:

... [This] experience of the black artist as the uncomfortably proximate 'stranger' or the 'bearer and embodiment of incongruity led to the development of discursive strategies and the invention of numerous taxonomies to deny proximity and coeval-ness and to re-establish spatial and temporal distance (2003:171).

Mudimbe notes the intermediary spaces in the constructed hierarchies of taxonomic practices:

Because of the colonising structure, a dichotomising system has emerged, and with it a great number of paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern, oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialised civilisation; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. In Africa a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter (1988:4).

Marginality is assigned to this intermediate space *between* the 'traditional' and "projected modernity of colonialism" (1988:4). However, as I discuss later, rather than being a stage en-route, this marginal space is contested and is "the locus of paradoxes that call into question the modalities and implications of modernisation in Africa" (Mudimbe 1988:5).

Further, Oguibe (2002) has commented that the maintenance of distance through partial education sustained the relationship of colonial dependency in Africa. One aspect of this strategy was to implement the craft/art divide within the colonial curriculum .. and to offer limited training in the Fine Arts. This was often accompanied, as discussed in the next section, with the attitude that a collective 'African creativity' needed to be preserved. The other, as noted above, was to institute intermediary categories such as 'Transitional Art'. Such measures imposed conceptual limits upon modern black artists who were attempting to assert themselves in unique ways. In this sense, as Van Robbroeck discusses: "The modern African artist is an exceptional 'traditional' artist (hence authentically African)..." and is

... travelling the path of transition from tradition (the past, collectivity, Africa) to modernity (the present, individuation, the West). The fact that he occupies a transitional space, however, means that he has not yet attained all the gifts promised by modernity (2006: 115).

Oguibe (2002) also notes that the earlier Christian strategy was perhaps more violent where traditional practices were condemned and ritual artefacts destroyed.

2.1.4 LIMINAL SPACES 2: THE COLLECTIVE AFRICAN

The reductive categorisation that has informed colonial and post-apartheid styled African art history is unfortunately still ubiquitous. John Picton, criticising Susan Vogel's use of categories or 'strains' (as she terms it), in her conceptualisation of African art in the blockbuster exhibition *Africa Explores* (1995), notes that they are far removed from the lived experiences of the artists they classify:

The essential problem here, I would suggest, is that neither the categories themselves, nor the paradigm contrasts that underpin them, have their origins in the lives of the people whose things are the subject matter of 'Africa Explores' (Picton 1999:124).

These strains, Picton suggests, are granted pan-African status by implication: "... that across Africa, art produced within each category, and artists working — or boxed — within each category will manifest some essential similarity..." (1999:124). This brings me to the second liminal space cast for African Art — that of the collective.

As mentioned in chapter 1, Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art* and Helen Gardner's *Art Through The Ages* which were, for the most part prescribed textbooks in South African school syllabi, reduced art produced outside of Western categories to marginal spaces using essentialised narratives. The illusion was that African art "remained formally and stylistically unchanged for centuries" (Van Robbroeck 2006:97). This further perpetuated the view that modern African artists had access to an age-old creativity, outside of time and change. Van Robbroeck's central project finds that representations of African material culture in South African art history texts equally partake in essentialised narratives about black African artists and the presumed 'African spirit' to which they have access. Texts of E J De Jager, who is both highly published and influential, typify the casting of these artists in this allochronic⁷ and collective way. Van Robbroeck situates De Jager's view — that 'Africanness' is genetically encoded — within early colonial and evolutionary theories, drawing our attention to the work of the Belgian missionary Tempels, who influenced a trajectory of colonial views that Africans had a unique way of thinking as a result of an 'Africa-gene' (2006:101). In De Jager's recent publication, *Images of Man* (1992) he concludes that for the central aim of writing African art history in Africa, i.e. forming unities and collective groups, it is the Africanness that unites the art of this continent. This near mythic cohesiveness of the continent of Africa has further implications for the modern black artist:

The essential nature of the universal Black Man is conflated with the concept of Africa as mysterious, exotic and dark ... The tendency to ascribe to Africa certain traits and

⁷ This refers to the different concept of time applied to African societies in colonial writing (Van Robbroeck 2006).

characteristics, to personify Africa as a primal, irrational presence is pervasive in basically all texts dealing with black cultural modernity (Van Robbroeck 2003:175).

It is also in this light that early training centres for black artists in South Africa are to be understood. For example, in the case of the Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg, a founder notes the following:

... (the students) were shown the shapes and design elements inherent in the universal artistic tradition of tribal Africa with the hope that there may be some dormant psychological link with their tribal past which could prove to be a foundation on which a twentieth century style could flourish (cited in Mcleod 1986:139).

In chapter 3, Ernest Mancoba's life and art are considered alongside implications of 'collective-Africa' views, so clearly evident within the texts and discourses of South African art in the twentieth century. It is suggested that the role of liberal white practitioners and educators in promoting and distilling this view in black artists during this time, needs further research and is one amongst many instances of complexity and contingency in African modernism. It is particularly multifaceted in relation to Mancoba since in his own writings he relates the idea of an African creativity, spirituality and philosophy in complex ways that suggest negotiation. The influences he drew — and his departures from — Negritude and pan-African ideas developing in the mid-twentieth century, as well as closely related humanistic outlooks in Europe after the First World War, particularly as voiced and expressed by the Cobra movement, are discussed in the following chapter.

I turn now to some of the contradictions emerging from the liminal or in between categories described above.

2.1.5 MODERNIST PARADOXES

Early evidence of the internal contradictions in the foundations of the modernist paradigm was in the coexistence of the emancipatory language of humanism with that of slavery, echoing the observation by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the beginning to *The Social Contract* "*Man* is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (cited in Phillips 2000:73). That such a contradiction exists reinforces the sway of capitalist and political motivations at the heart of modernist discourses, a stark reminder that modernism in Europe and later America emerged, for the most part, in conjunction with capitalist economic systems.

It is, however, in the categories of 'states of progress' (such as, in-transit, transitional and en-route etc.) imposed on the 'Other' that modernist ambivalences and contradictions emerge most evidently:

Bauman suggests that an inevitable by-product of the modernist compulsion to create order, is the proliferation of ambiguity and ambivalence — an ambivalence so pervasive that it points to an aporia at the very heart of the Enlightenment project. (Van Robbroeck 2006:46).

Central to the paradoxical nature is the evident failure to contend with objects and people who fell outside of the determined boundaries of these categories. In other words, modernity posited a progressive framework of human development, and such movement was bound to conditions present in certain locations at certain times, then, following this logic, those outside of these conditions are deemed 'pre-modern' or *en-route*. The question is *how does one account for artistic or intellectual achievement of the Western kind that occurred from within the heart of the 'pre-modern'?*

Van Robbroeck confirms that such modernist ambivalences are 'virulently' present in South African art writing:

Some of these ambiguities flow from the taxonomic imperative... while the tension between universalism and difference, and the co-existence of the noble savage/cannibal savage also contribute substantially to some of the most flagrant contradictions and ambivalences in these texts (Van Robbroeck 2006:48).

It is evident in the clarity of Van Robbroeck's delineation of modernist paradoxes, that modern black African expression using Western forms and techniques was to prove a difficulty for Western art history because of its allegiance to Eurocentric views of the 'Other' in the social sciences. The life and work of early black African modernist artists such as Aina Onabolu, Gerard Bhengu and Ernest Mancoba, in their individual brilliance, exposed the internal inadequacies of Western categorizations and assumptions about African people.

2.2 SINGULARITY AND ART HISTORY

This thesis is partly a response to the following appeal by Lize van Robbroeck:

... [there] is much scope for a radical reconsideration of the practices, politics and discourses that contributed towards the establishment of a modern black art praxis in South Africa (2006:149).

And later, she details *singularity* as an approach to this task:

To undertake such an investigation, the singularity of each and every black artist's own complex construction of subjectivity (in which his/her art no doubt plays a constitutive role) must be taken into consideration (2006:254).

In my research, I have encountered further calls aligned with this one: Sylvester Ogbechie hails "... the need to produce a series of books ... on key figures and contexts of African modernism thus providing the proper foundation for critical and theoretical analysis" (Ogbechie, 2005); Cohn Richards names some of the "contradictions and double-binds out of which South African modernism has grown" and "the aesthetic dimension of this complex cultural experience — may be better understood and appreciated once these entanglements and contradictions are more fully acknowledged" (2006:69 *his italics*); John Picton has stated that "we have little to go on by way of studies of local patronage, criticism, and evaluation" and that we need to have a comparative evaluation across countries in Africa to justify any generalized African art historical categories (Picton 1999:124); Salah Hassan has also argued for more complexity: "African art forms must be perceived as expressions of a more complex African reality (1999:221); and lastly, but that which concerns the content of the final chapter of this thesis, Rasheed Araeen's appeal: "...it should now be the priority of an historians in South Africa to look into this matter [Mancoba and modernism], and claim what to me is an extraordinary achievement of a 'colonised' subject" (2005:417). For Araeen, this task requires, "not only a much more rigorous critical discourse and theoretical underpinning, but also a challenge to the established art historical canons" and is to be an undertaking by "Africans themselves" (2005:417).

In van Robbroeck's conception a singular account entails, amongst other recommendations in the conclusion to her thesis: "[The] whiteness of previous (and current!) canons ... [must be] thoroughly acknowledged and unpacked" (2006:253);⁵⁵ art history needs to become more inter-disciplinary in order to break free from narrow accounts of modern black art simply in terms of stylistic or educational influence or, as she terms, "biographical sketches" (2006:254); art history needs to recognise the extent to which artists participate "... in the active construction of his/her own racialisation" and through this assert unique subjectivity (2006:255); a constructive and meticulous dialogue with past historical accounts and sources is needed (2006:256); art history needs to acknowledge complexity and contingency — that authoritative historical accounts are things of the past (2006:256 & 258).

I acknowledge that these suggestions have greatly assisted my thinking on Ernest Mancoba in the chapter to follow.

Much earlier, in 1987, Ankara Nettleton hailed that "Writing on these artists (Bhengu, Sekoto etc) needs to be thoroughly revised and we need to see them fully, coolly in front of the growing polarization of black and white in this country" (1987:169)

CONCLUSION

Van Robbroeck's project demonstrates the reach of poststructuralist and postcolonial ideas (contextualised in chapter 1) in South African art history. My own work proceeds on the considerable achievements of Lize van Robbroeck and others, towards a critical art history of South African modernism. I have not intended to cover all the ground that she has in her substantial doctoral study but rather to select relevant arguments and information regarding 'distance' in the modernist paradigm and to draw on her suggestion of singularity as a way forward in discussions of African Modernism.

Modernist writings, as Van Robbroeck elaborates throughout her thesis, relied on stereotyped accounts of African cultural production that persisted until the late twentieth century. That African artists were perceived to represent an essential African essence (or lack of, due to contamination) demonstrates the misrepresentation of Africans as the collectivised 'Other'. It is against this totalising narrative of African artists and the spirit they enshrine in art history and art criticism that the necessity for the singular and contingent acknowledgement arises. I carry this conviction into the following chapter on Ernest Mancoba.

CHAPTER 3

TRAVERSING DISTANCES: ERNEST MANCOBA

By transgressing the boundaries of cultural territory reserved for Africans in the colonial binary of barbarism and civilisation, the modern black artist brought to the inner circle of European cultural modernity an uncomfortable distance and an even less digestible sameness.

Lize van Robbroeck, 2003

I readily would confess to trespassing, but only in the domain of art where, methinks, it should be seen as a quality, for contributing to the cultural breathing of Mankind, rather than as an offence.

Ernest Mancoba, 2002

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I employ the thematic of 'distance' to assist my understanding of the early twentieth-century modern expression of Ernest Mancoba and the writings that circle him. The emphasis of this thesis is on art historiography with specific reference to the notion of 'distance'. Hence this chapter is not to be considered as a comprehensive monograph or biography, rather as an exemplary case study.

Ernest Methuen Mancoba (1904-2002), as a black African artist, achieved a level of unprecedented success in the institutions of European modernism. By relocating to the avant-garde 'centre' — moving to Paris in 1938 — Mancoba actively broke boundaries of distance and difference: to quote Enwezor, his "ineluctable presence disturbs, disrupts and problematises the postcolonial border" (1999:245). Following this line of thought, I suggest that Mancoba's life and art presents a challenge to art history in two areas: *institutional distance* — the geographic 'centring' of the avant-garde in Europe and the Western exclusivity and ownership of the traditions of depicting distance (particularly in painting), in other words Eurocentricism in art; and *hermeneutic distance* — varying interpretations of early black African modernism. It must be noted that these two categories of distance are of separate orders. The former (geographic and depicted distance) details Mancoba's physical movements to various

'centres' of art — first Cape Town and then Paris — as well as his dialogue with the conventions and contraventions of the painting tradition at the time. The latter (hermeneutic distance) encompasses divergent readings of Mancoba, his art, intentions and relationship to African modernism. I position these divergences of approach under the rubric of distance as they, in my view, represent a mode of hermeneutic 'circling' of this artist and this time — continually searching for cause and motivation. I position my own reading of his life in this circuitous project. In addition to the above two categories, I intend, throughout this chapter, to discuss the notion of *transported* art praxis. It is suggested that this is a further instance of distance that significantly relates to Ernest Mancoba and early African modernism. As will be shown, numerous Western influences, either directly or indirectly, played a significant and formative role in his development and maturation as an artist and thinker. Mancoba's life and art has been extensively researched and recorded by the historian Elza Miles in her book, *Lifeline out of Africa: the art of Ernest Mancoba* (1994).

In sum, I hope, by way of response to the calls for singularity elaborated in the previous chapter, to investigate some of the *transgressions* of distance and *complexities* of writing pertaining to this distinctive artist. I do not attempt to locate the 'true placement' of Ernest Mancoba, but rather to suggest areas of complication that a South African (and African) art historical approach need consider when broaching the subject of African modernism.

Following some preliminary background, drawing largely from Miles' 'archive', I move to an elaboration of Mancoba and distance in terms both geographic and depicted. I then focus on current interpretations: there is much contestation concerning Mancoba's placement in Western modernist narratives as well as his role as a pioneer black African modernist. I will be discussing the perceived shifts in emphasis in the writings that attempt to interpret and place him — thus traversing and drawing attention to the interpretive distances. It is noteworthy, for reasons mentioned in the previous chapter, that Mancoba was, for the most part, not included in South African art historiography until 1988, when *The Neglected Tradition* marked a radical (and public) change in direction. It is, therefore, writings published mostly after 1994 that I seek to analyse and compare.

I adopt the term 'hermeneutic circle' which, in the field of hermeneutics, natues the process of understanding a 'text' by relating its constituent parts to the whole and vice versa (Macey 2000). This implies the need for an understanding of the cultural and historic context as well as of the authorial position. In this thesis, I use this term to describe the tuany authors who engage in the process of understanding and interpreting both the multiple sources describing or evidencing this particular historical moment and the intentions of the artists who lived it.

3.1 A PRELIMINARY HISTORICAL SKETCH

In this short overview⁵¹ of Mancoba's life story, I emphasise the dialectic between Western influences in his life and the urge to rekindle or retain a sense of tradition (and the significant people and ideas that encouraged this), during his years in South Africa (1904-1938) and Europe (1938-2002).

Ernest Mancoba was born in Turfontein, a suburb of Johannesburg, in 1904. The Mancoba family soon moved to Middelberg in Mpumalanga after his father, Irvine Mancoba, who was from the Eastern Cape, was allocated a piece of land to farm. However, drought and political circumstance forced them to return to the city where Irvine found work as a storeman and translator on the mines in Boksburg. He was also a respected preacher and Christian evangelist, resulting in Mancoba's dominant Christian upbringing. However, as Mancoba has suggested, his mother, Florence Manganwana, although Anglican, imparted a sense of tradition and the concept of *Ubuntu*. She also read African poetry to the young Ernest and, as he later recalls, taught him 'the notion of expressing the unsayable' (Obrist interview 2002:14). In Boksburg, Mancoba began his formal education at an Anglican Church School and, when the family moved in 1915, continued his Christian education in Benoni. Following this he enrolled at the Diocesan Teachers' Training College at Grace Dieu, Pietersberg (now Polokwane), where his interest in sculpture was initially encouraged by Sister Pauline. She "inspired" him to carve the first portrayal of a black *African Madonna* (1929), which caused some controversy, and *St Augustine of Canterbury* (1932) (Miles 1997:137). It is noted that sculpture was considered to be the 'African medium' at the time and was promoted as such in early missionary training centres. The little perspective that students were formally taught at Grace Dieu was for teaching purposes (Miles 1994).

Mancoba, following his instruction at the college taught there until 1929, at which stage a bursary from the Transvaal Education Department allowed him to study for a Bachelor of Arts at the Native College of South Africa⁵² (now University of Fort Hare). Here he shared a room with A C Jordan⁵³ and befriended Govan Mbeki and I B Tabata, amongst many other leading intellectuals of the time, and those yet to be.⁶⁰ He was actively involved in student life and politics: in 1934 Mancoba became president of the Students' Representative

⁵¹ I refer the reader to Elva Miles' extensive historical analysis in *Lifeline out of Africa* (1994), and the recent catalogue to the 2006 Mancoba exhibition, *In The Name of All Humanity* compiled by Bridget Thompson for limber and more extensive background information.

Mancoba notes that at the time, unlike the Bantu education policies, the university did not have an inferior or different outlook and Mancoba's subjects included English, history, mathematics, psychology and biology (interview with Obrist 2002).

⁵² The father of Palk Jordan our current minister of Arts and Culture and who later authored the novel *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (The Wrath of The Ancestors).

⁵³ Other intellectuals, artists and leaders who came from Fort Hare include: Isaac Tabata, Jane Cool, Dennis Brutus, Can Themba and Nelson Mandela.

Council, played rugby, and was involved in Pathfinders and in literary and debating societies. He also significantly acquired the nickname 'Stereo' after repeatedly saying: "Don't be a Western stereotype, be true to yourself" (Thompson 2006:44).⁵¹

His studies were interrupted in 1935 as his bursary was not extended. Miles comments that this interruption strengthened his resolve to follow an artistic path (1997:137). Speaking about his decision to follow art as opposed to politics, despite friends intimating that art was not the most urgent thing to concentrate on", Mancoba offered the view that art followed a more philosophically meaningful and sustainable route to emancipation, "... without which any practical achievement would, probably sooner or later, deviate and miss its point" (Obrist interview 2002:15).

Mancoba then moved to Cape Town, settling in District Six. Here he came into contact with political activists and community leaders such as Jane Cool, Dr Goolam Gool, as well as Jewish artists Lippy Lipshitz, Irma Stem and Elza Dziomba. Lipshitz shared books on Van Gogh as well as recommending to Mancoba the book *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1926) by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, in which the impact of West and Central African art on modern European art is discussed. Miles suggests that at this point Mancoba's conception of art changed and he began to see the artist as not only engaging in realistic imitation: "... [the book] had left a lasting impression of the inspirational influence and innovative effect which the classic art of Africa had on twentieth century European art" (Miles 1994:16).⁵² Mancoba was not alone in this interest: Dziomba, Lipshitz, Mayer, Piemeef, Stem, Battiss and Preller, amongst many other white artists, experimented with African forms in their art.⁵³ Both Dziomba and Lipshitz also influenced Mancoba's desire to enter a conversation about African art in Paris:

When I got in touch with Lippy and Dziomba who had been to Paris, and who had given me a picture of Paris and when I had read the literature which Lippy encouraged me to ... I was encouraged to dig in and find more about Paris ... as a centre of attraction of people who came from different areas and parts of Europe to follow what was taking place in Paris. They spoke to me about this and I also shared my knowledge with Sekoto. We dreamed of coming to Europe especially to Paris in order to give our

⁵¹ Later Mancoba was nicknamed 'Beaver' for his "unorthodox" dress sense while teaching at Khaiso School in Pietersberg (Manganyi 1996:18).

⁵² Miles notes that in *The Star* (8 June 1936) Mancoba referred to the significant impact of this book and the "... innovative effect which the classical art of Africa had on twentieth century European art" (Miles 1994:16) and that which influenced the sculpture *Faith* completed in 1936.

⁵³ Of these artists, Stem and Battiss have shown both well-intentioned, yet at times problematic, relationships with Africa and its art (Nettleton 1987). In a 1958 publication by Battiss, Junod, Grossert and Franz titled *The Art of Africa* which aimed to educate the public about African art, strange assumptions appear: "As to prelogism, even if the Bantu show striking evidence of inconsistency in logic in some phases of their lives, their technique of craftsmanship and their art are patent proof that when they developed a tool or instrument, when they built a hut or carved a headrest or a bowl, their mind worked perfectly normally" (cited in Nettleton 1987:167).

contribution of the experience of humanity in Africa (Alex Laird interview 1993, cited in Miles 1994:18).

At the end of 1936 Mancoba was encouraged to complete his degree through the University of South Africa (Unisa) and take a teaching post to increase his chances of acquiring a bursary to go overseas (Miles 1994). In 1937 he returned to Benoni and went to teach at Khaiso Secondary School near Pietersburg. During this time Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, a fellow teacher, made regular trips to Sotho and Mandebele villages in Pietersburg with the intention of accessing the "traditions of Africa" (Miles 1994:26). Miles remarks: "Mancoba realised that both he and Sekoto were distanced from these people through their Christian colonial upbringing" (1994:26) and that this chasm, to be "totally spiritually African and totally spiritually occidental" (Alex Laird interview 1993, cited in Miles 1994:26), distressed Mancoba. An interview in 1936 also suggests that Mancoba *felt* or was *impelled* to search for an African connection in his art:

I hope to be able to go to the Transkei soon to work on *what you* would call 'primitive Africa'. I make all my studies from models, and I would love to work among more natural subjects than I can find in the towns ... I am working on a few subjects now, and if I can make enough money from them I will go to the reserves and try to model a "primitive Africa" and give *you* the native idea of the native (Cape Times, 19 February 1936 cited in Miles 1994:26, italics — my emphasis).

However, the audience suggested in the quote above (see italics), and a similar audience implicated by a job offer by the Department of Native Affairs to carve tourist "pseudo-tribal" figures and would-be aboriginal trinkets", "proved inadequate and abhorrent to Mancoba: "... there was, basically, at the time, no public to receive what I had to express..." (Obrist interview 2002:15). Evidently, Mancoba did not wish to enter this kind of power relationship with a perceived audience of ignorant white people and tourists.

Mancoba graduated at the end of 1937 with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Unisa. The following year he left for Paris (with the intention of returning in two years) after being awarded a bursary and loan of 100 pounds for each year by the Bantu Welfare Trust. In a letter of thanks to the trust Mancoba expressed his artistic intentions:

For many years I have been working at sculpture for the sake of art, but also as a form of expression which I believe, will put before South Africa and to the world at large, the viewpoint of the African in the stupendous effort of building more harmonious relations in this our land (cited in Miles 1994:31).

In 1936 Mancoba was approached by N J van Warmelo (state ethnologist) to carve tourist souvenirs for the Empire Exhibition by the Department of Native Affairs.

On his way there he visited the British Museum in London, admiring the African art (Miles 1997) and, as Miles interprets, drew parallels with his own expression:

Though he had been inspired by it [the serenity of African art], he noticed that his own carvings were different. Whereas the ancient sculptors contributed to the continuation of the traditional community, Mancoba's art showed the pain of a shattered society as reflected in the individual (1997:140).

Once in Paris, Mancoba enrolled at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs and befriended several Danish artists including Christian Poulsen, Ejler Bille and Sonja Ferlov, his wife-to-be. Mancoba frequented the Musée de l'Homme's collection of African art and once came across Pablo Picasso admiring new acquisitions. For Mancoba this contradiction of Picasso's famously misconstrued statement: "L'art nègre? connaît pas!"⁶⁸ only reaffirmed his view that African art inspired a spiritual connection in Picasso's work (Obrist interview, 2002:19). Apart from this, Mancoba encountered many other important figures in European modernism, including Asger Jørn and Alberto Giacometti, who became a close friend, as well as fully experiencing what must have been a climate of intense innovation but also competition and strategy. Most importantly, during these early years in Europe, Mancoba experienced, on a large and powerful scale, two-dimensional art forms and the frequent revisions of the conventions of this age-old pictorial tradition in modern art. Although he had been drawing (and possibly painting) before his arrival in Europe and had also experienced his close friend Gerard Sekoto's experimentations with pencil, crayon and watercolour at Khaiso Secondary,⁶⁹ his first oil painting titled '*Composition*' was only made in 1940 in Paris. Significantly, with this newly chosen medium, the titling of his work changed, often referencing the new technique of its execution (drawing/painting). Functional and descriptive titles such as those from early sculptures such as *Faith* (1936), which foregrounded function over material aspect, ceased with few exceptions (Miles 1994). The concern for natural appearance was replaced with a concern for "the autonomy of line" as new methods for drawing — "hatching, grids, zig-zags, chevrons, spirals, concentric circles and scribbles" — emphasised the picture plane (Miles 1994:34). This significant shift in artistic convention from representative and functional form to a more conceptual, abstract and 'art for art sake' concern, i.e. the transference of praxis, is central to my understanding of Mancoba's practice

"Negro art? I do not know!"

"His first impulse to paint, and later his first impulse to carve, came at a missionary college at Pietersberg, and he naturally adopted the religious style of Western Europe" (in *The Star* 1936 cited in Miles 1994:34). These works have not yet been traced (Miles 1994).

It is noted (Manyangi 1996) that Mancoba played the role of mentor to Sekoto, admiring and encouraging his sketching. Sekoto recalls: "I used sometimes to copy illustrations from calendars and Mancoba said to me: You must just paint as you feel. As I was just fresh from college, these words inspired me to get back to community life and to discover again my childhood days when I used to express what I saw and felt. Unfortunately, this 'return' was only partial for I was living and working within the premises and hence following the school routine" (Manyangi 1996:21).

Li Dvuble Unite and the "personage" paintings of the 1960s (Miles 1994:34)

and this period of African modernism. This, however, cannot be isolated from his very real financial difficulties in Europe resulting in his near exclusive shift to pictorial representations.⁶⁹ Financial concerns also played a part in determining the aspects of the form his sculptures took whilst in South Africa.⁷⁰ I return to this notion of a shifting and transference of praxis in a later discussion in this thesis.

In 1940 Mancoba was interned in a camp for British subjects in France until 1944. During this difficult period, Mancoba and Sonja were given permission to get married (in 1942). Their marriage left them outside of national boundaries due to South African law banning mixed marriages and Danish policy stipulating that women assume the citizenship of their husbands.

1947 saw Ernest and Sonja move to Kattinge near Roskilde in Denmark and jointly exhibit at the Host (Harvest) exhibitions of 1948 and 1949. These exhibitions were the early manifestations of the Cobra movement which the Mancoba's joined in 1950, although their membership only lasted for one year. Cobra, an acronym for the capital cities of the founder members (Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam), has been described as the 'last avant-garde movement of the twentieth century' and included, amongst other important figures of European modernism, Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Asger Jorn and Carl-Henning Pedersen. The expressionist aesthetic, as well as the aims of this movement expressed in various manifestos and artists' writings, undoubtedly influenced Ernest Mancoba's own outlook. However, Miles notes that both Sonja and Mancoba departed from the views of this movement in that they both believed that the artist, although expressing individual urges, was ultimately responsible to the community (Miles 1997:142).

It is Mancoba's similarity to Cobra philosophy and theory — and the general humanism in Europe after the war — as well as to Negritude and pan-African philosophies that I wish to stress in later discussions of Ernest Mancoba's placement in art history. I now interrupt this brief history of Mancoba's life to comment on some of these influences.

Much of Mancoba's own writings and ideas expressed in interviews and through his art reflect deep conversations with the philosophies and ideologies he encountered in the

⁶⁹ Asked why he stopped sculpting in Europe, Mancoba has frequently referred to the lack of money, materials and space but Bridget Thompson comments that there was more to it and Mancoba expresses a further reason: "...the material that one uses is secondary ... for example the Eskimos in the north, they have used feathers and they used fishbone and they used all that they could get to have expressed in a tangible way something to be left for the coming generations" (in Thompson 2006:77).

⁷⁰ In South Africa this also restricted the forms of his expressions: "My mind in full of ideas ... If only I can get the material to execute them. Sometimes I want to do something big but I have only had a small piece of wood, and the carving has come out quite different (in *The Sur* June 1936 cited in Miles 1994:23).

different phases of his life. These conversations — with *Ubuntu*, pan-Africanism, Marxism, Negritude and Humanism — were always against the backdrop of a profound religiosity carried from his Christian upbringing. The relationships are complex and cannot be sufficiently addressed in this thesis. Rather, I select aspects of confluence and divergence with some of these influential ideas in order to contextualize Mancoba's art and writings as well as some of the approaches towards Mancoba's work discussed later in this thesis. Mancoba's philosophical assertions of 'Africanness', spirituality and expression, contrary to some interpretations, seem to confound any clear-cut reading of influence or affiliation, instead pointing to the irreducible and complex nature of his creativity and world-view.

Mancoba has frequently alluded to the concept of *Ubuntu*, imparted to him by his mother, as playing a significant role in his life and art. *Ubuntu* — 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu' (a person is a person by and because of other people) names an approach to other people based on respect and recognition (Masokoane 2006). Masokoane finds the concept present in a plethora of quests for social justice throughout history: the anti-colonial struggles of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the quest of Sojourner Truth in the US, the Mau Mau plight for independence in Kenya, the long struggle for recognition of Cheikh Anta Diop, Steve Biko's Black Consciousness, Kwameh Nkrumah's pan-Africanism, and more recently in the lyrics of Bob Marley (Masokoane 2006:100). The concept was also present in different forms at the University of Fort Hare in the early 1930s. Professor Ntongela Masilela (2006) provides an insightful history into one of these — the New Africa Movement — during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the resulting intellectual climate in which Mancoba immersed himself at the University of Fort Hare where he went to study in 1930. As Masilela notes, "The historical imperative of the New Africa Movement was a construction of modernity in South Africa" (2006:31). Tracing its roots in the work of the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s who negotiated the difficult terrain of language — that European languages were deemed the route to modernity and the marginalisation of African languages — Masilela follows the trajectory of the negotiation for an African modernity. Subsequent debates on the pages of */my° Zabanstundu*, founded by John Tengo Jabavu in 1884, took a political slant where questions of language still featured prominently. The central question was whether to appropriate the English language to convey ideological concerns and facilitate movement into modernity, or whether African languages were as capable. S.E.K Mqhayi, as Masilela (2006) comments, presented a significant argument for the latter demonstrating, in novels such as *Ityala lamawele* (The Case of Twins) in 1914 and other poems, "... that only through African languages anchored in African philosophies of life, could modernity be made meaningful to the life experiences of African people" (Masilela 2006:34). These ideas were imparted to Mancoba by Mqhayi himself and by the many writers who followed his example

and who formed part of Mancoba's intellectual milieu such as KC Jordan and B.W Vilakazi. According to Masilela, "Mqhayi imparted ... the conviction that Africa had the linguistic amplitude, historical sensibility, artistic vision and stylistic tradition to encounter Europe on terms defined by African imperatives" (2006:34). Masilela also traces further association and influences to the Zulu intellectuals of the 1930s and 40s (the likes of H.I.E Dhlomo, and Nimrod Ndebele), in particular the attempt "to shift the central preoccupation of the New Africa Movement from politics to aesthetics" (*ibid*). This sheds some light on Mancoba's statement (previously quoted in part) and his movement to different artistic centres to follow his creative imperative:

... even though some of my political friends told me that the artistic activity was not the most urgent thing to concentrate upon, while our people were undergoing such a terrible plight, but I believed, on the contrary, that Art was precisely also a means to produce a higher consciousness in Man, which for me, is highly part of the struggle for any human liberation, and without which any practical achievement would probably, sooner or later, deviate and miss its point. Therefore making art, I thought, was as urgent as working for the political evolution (Obrist interview 2002:15).

These words echo a similar sentiment to those of Njabulo Ndebele in an 1972 article titled *The Blacks and Art* from a publication edited by Bantu Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement:

Blacks can develop their own universal standards of artistic excellence. They must ignore the white critic, who reviewing a black art exhibition, says the black artist has not progressed beyond the township themes. ... The blacks must ignore the frustrated black journalist who says that South African blacks must win the political kingdom first before they begin to create artistic work of any meaning and merit. An imaginative exploration of the miserable human conditions in which people live, touches the fibre of revolt in them: the fibre that seeks to reassert human dignity (Ndebele cited in Richards 2006:62-63).

The significance here is in the assertion of arts' relevance to the struggle for dignity. This, as Colin Richards (2006:63) infers, represented a connection between black consciousness and humanism. I suggest that the humanism of post-war Europe, specifically as presented by the Cobra art movement, and the early ideas of the New Africa Movement and later black consciousness combined, in no simple configuration, to inform Mancoba's views on the purposes and forms of his art. That art, for Mancoba, was a form of political struggle and human emancipation is reinforced in many of his own writings.

What these early ideological movements further suggest, as Oguibe (2003, 2005) has argued, is that Africans forged their own modernity by strategically appropriating European forms, be

it mastering the language and political rhetoric of the coloniser, or its artistic forms as Mancoba and other African artists pursued. This 'appropriation' if that is indeed the right term, is to be situated within a dialectic between Western initiated spirituality, via Christianity, and a materialistic/theoretical approach to emancipation. Such tension is evident in Mancoba's relationship to Marxism and Negritude.

Marxism featured strongly in discussion at Fort Hare but, as recollected by Jane Gool Tabata, only really confronted Mancoba's religiosity once he had moved to Cape Town, during heated discussion between Mancoba and his good friend I B Tabata:

These two young school friends as I subsequently heard had long midnight sessions on the beach at Woodstock. Religion seemed to have been the chief topic. It appeared that Ernest was brought up in a religious home and was deeply involved with the nuns at Grace Dieu near Pietersburg. Tabata was a Marxist and gave Ernest a number of "rationalist" and scientific books to read on the history and nature of religion. There was a great deal of heat generated during these discussions... (Jane Gool Tabata cited in Miles 1994: 12).

This confrontation, between the spiritual and the material or, put differently, the cold and alienating effects of 'science' and rationality on humanity emerges in many of Mancoba's dialogues (see Thompson 2006, Obrist 2002).

Finally, the pan-Africanist ideas and philosophies that abounded during his years at Fort Hare seemed to anticipate the Negritudist philosophies he encountered in Europe. Two years prior to Mancoba, Aline Césaire from Martinique and Leopold Sedar Senghor from Dakar arrived in Paris (Obrist 2002). Although they did not meet, significant dialogue with Senghor and Césaire's philosophy — Negritude — seems to have taken place. This is both in terms of an affinity with earlier 'pan-African' ideas developed in South Africa and significant departures, again the tension between the spiritual and the rational:

... where I had a problem with their approach was that I never believed, for my part, that the racist ideology of the Occident is a problem of defective reason or insufficient comprehension, and I do not think, therefore, that it can be treated by forming new ideological concepts like 'la negritude, any more than I would imagine that the humanity of the white man might rely upon any virtual concept of la blanchitude' Indeed I do not believe that we Africans, any more than other people should need (as it would not diminish racism a jot) to show the white man how good we are at speaking or writing his language, performing in his sports, learning his customs, manners and

⁴ The activist and author (*Time Longer than Rope* — 1948) Eddie Roux had a significant impact on the young students: "What amazed the students was that Roux spoke out against the political coalition between Smuts and

intellectual notions or to develop ourselves along the lines of his so-called 'universality', to be considered as human beings and his equals, because the true universality is a common goal on the cultural political and spiritual horizon, that will be reached only when all ethnic groups achieve, through an authentic dialogue, the many-faceted diamond shape and the full blossoming of the deepest and widest humanity (Obrist interview, 2002:16-17).

For Mancoba, balancing the inequality of the past is not an intellectual pursuit or the need to convince the oppressor of the value and skill of the oppressed according to their standards. This stance echoes the sentiments of some of the writers to be examined later in this chapter.

Mancoba also discards redressive strategies as they implicate further imbalances. In this he also prefigures much of the later debate surrounding his work:

Anyway, I have never been convinced, as far as I am concerned, by the validity - even with the best intentions, as for instance, to redress past injustices - of any kind of ethnic praise or by the singing of a particular race's virtues (Obrist interview 2002:17).

In Mancoba's dialogue with ideas of pan-Africanism and Negritude which are both characterised by the struggle for the political emancipation of Africa and which simultaneously promote 'Africanness', a concept which represents the shared essence of Africans, there is no simple outcome and his own reflections on these ideas are nuanced and complex. Attempts to situate and understand Mancoba's work by looking to the ideas that abounded at the time must consider his departure from and negotiation with them, as well as a myriad of other factors such as his religiosity, his concern for originality, his intellect and political acumen. I return to some of these nuances when discussing the different views on his placement in art history.

Returning to the story of Mancoba's life, following their stay in Denmark, Mancoba and Sonja moved back to Paris settling in Oigny-en-Valois (Aisne). Here, Mancoba produced largely pictorial works, also experimenting with printmaking. He contributed, irregularly, to the journal *Musee Vivant*, notably a letter on the contribution of African art. These sentiments were echoed in an article published in the Danish journal *Hvedekorn* (grain of wheat). In 1961 the family became French citizens. Between 1960 and 1990 both Mancoba and Sonja were included in numerous group shows, mainly in Denmark and France, including a touring retrospective of his work (1977) organised by Troels Andersen in Denmark. Sonja died in November 1984.

Herzog. He introduced them to the Communist Party's hide magazine Indlela yenkulelo which was aimed at African intellectuals. He also briefed them in the teachings of Marx and Lenin" (Miles 1994(12).

1994 saw Mancoba being awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the Western Cape after Elza Miles, his biographer, brought his contribution to the attention of Ciraj Rassool (Thompson 2006:14). A retrospective of Mancoba and Sonja's work, *Hand in Hand*, was held at the Johannesburg art galley in 1994. Mancoba returned after fifty-six years for the opening and was reunited with past friends and family. From 1995-1997 Mancoba received the Lee Krasner Award from the Pollock—Krasner Foundation and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Fort Hare in 1996. Mancoba died in France in 2002.

3.2 INSTITUTIONAL DISTANCE: GEOGRAPHIC AND DEPICTED

Mancoba, by travelling and depicting distance (contributing to modernist concerns with the picture plane), disturbs the view that the concept of modern art and its constant redefinition belong exclusively to white artists working from a Western cultural heritage within Western 'avant-garde' centres. In this section I begin by looking at the category of geographic distance and its uses for understanding Mancoba and his art. This is to be followed by discussion on Mancoba and the institution of painting he confronted in Europe. It is suggested here that Mancoba broke boundaries of difference and distance by entering the physical as well as intellectual and creative territory of the avant garde.

As I have presented, art history can be said to have participated in the construction of spatial distance between groups and individuals in its emphasis on certain historical trajectories for 'civilisation's' creative production (chapter 1). As discussed in chapter 2, the 'centre' defined its progress in this regard *against* the 'Other' and their so-called primitive artefacts and cultural practices, despite drawing key influences from African forms. Art, in the Western definition, was characterised by individual responses and advancements upon previous forms, whereas 'traditional' art of the 'primitive' was cast as collective, timeless and without aesthetic intention. By relocating to the centre of the art world at the time, Mancoba presented a challenge to these foundations. He presented himself and his work to the narratives of racial and evolutionary hierarchies, rational development and progress in the realm of fine arts,⁷² and by doing so assisted in exposing these as untenable.

In addition, the legalisation of Nationalist Party apartheid policy ten years after Mancoba left South Africa, served to keep Mancoba at a physical distance from his home country for most

⁷² This had been achieved earlier in other spheres of culture, particularly music and sport. Symbolically in 1936, two years before his departure, Mancoba was sent an inspirational postcard of the famous Olympic athlete, Jesse Owens, by Professor (of history) J. J. Rousseau in Berlin. (Miles 1994)

of the rest of his life. In his art and life (his marriage to Sonja Ferlov), Mancoba presented to Apartheid structures and ideology an uncomfortable 'problem'. The attitude towards Mancoba can be summed up in the following letter responding to the possibility of his return to South Africa after the war:

We are however disposed to put before you another view ... As you know the colour question does not loom so largely on the Continent as it does in this country. Were Mancoba to return alone it seems quite certain that relations or other friends would sooner or later provide him with funds for his wife's fare to South Africa.

Alarming thought European woman to be brought to Boksburg Location and there to raise a coloured family in Native surroundings.

... Union point of view: something we should strive to prevent and accordingly ... we should give Mancoba the chance of becoming absorbed into continental population (semi official letter recorded in the Internal Affairs office, 5 March 1945, cited in Miles 1994:41).

Racialised national attitudes in the arts were demonstrated by the exclusion of black artists from Fine Art training (e.g. Gerard Bhengu and Samuel Makoanyane). In art history departments and school syllabi prior to the 1970s, as discussed in the first chapter, a dominant formalist conservatism with a European modernist focus was paradigmatic, where black African production was excluded or marginally referred to. Hence Mancoba, and others, remained out of South African art history despite their significant achievements in Europe.¹

Certain writers (Okeke 2001, Araeen 2005, Oguibe 2005, Thompson 2006), and Mancoba himself (Obrist interview 2002), have commented on a perceived strategy to keep him at a distance by not recognising his part in European narratives: "... another one [art critic/art historian] totally obliterates my participation in the movement, on the reason that my work was suspected for not being European enough as it, in his words, 'betrays (my) African origin!'" (Obrist interview 2002:20)

The category of geographic distance encompasses many facets of Mancoba's history. Most importantly, it speaks to the construction and relationship between the 'centre' and periphery and Mancoba's negotiation of this historical circumstance. It highlights certain historical contingencies that I have alluded to in the short biographical section and above, for example: policies and attitudes that kept him from participating in the avant-garde in South African art; policies that kept him away from South Africa and in permanent exile; factors involved

Miles notes: "Although Lipshitz and Stern appreciated Mancoba's art, it was neglected in all the authoritative books on South African art until 1988. (1994:17) Miles further quotes the view of the Director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Dr Anton Hendricks: "I do not know what happened to the African sculptor

in his decision to move to Cape Town and then to Paris, including encouragements in this regard from other white artists; and a perceived move to keep Mancoba at a distance from European modernist narratives:⁷⁴ In this respect Mancoba has insightfully remarked on some of the nationalistic motivations concerning inclusion and exclusion from these movements:

But art history usually follows certain elements of national and political interest, and as it belongs to the wider science of general history, which needs to be reviewed, periodically every twenty years or so, to fit the evolution of the power-game between nations, only a few scholars in this domain are able to appreciate art and artists, independently from the changing taste of academic fashion and without taking into account the changing balance on the historical world-scene (Obrist interview, 2002).

In addition to the case of Cobra and what may be called a European or Scandinavian agenda," these words speak significantly to a present drive to promote an unproblematic African modernism. Before raising this issue further by looking at some of the voices concerned, I present the argument that Mancoba challenged a Eurocentric stranglehold on the conventions of painting in the avant-garde, i.e. depicted distance.

Modernism, as an account of the progression of art by formal breaks in representation (elaborated in chapter 2), was built on a history of the representation of distance (mimesis, perspective etc.). Departure from this tradition and many others in the realm of Fine Arts, as colonial and apartheid education policies and art history texts evince, was exclusively the domain of the 'civilised' Western 'white' artist. Those outsiders who attempted to enter the trajectory of realism (e.g. Onabolu, Bhengu and Mohl) were seen as imitators. Others (Enwonwu, Sekoto, Mancoba, Lam) entered the narrative of modernism, and faced the difficulty of not being accepted on comparable terms to a large majority of their white counterparts (Oguibe 2002). In South Africa, these artists were either excluded from the South African modernist canon, or written about in a separate way (this legacy continues)."

Mancoba. I was never extraordinarily impressed with his work. He was sent to Paris and never returned to South Africa." (1994:17).

Okeke (2001) notes the following: "According to Stokvis, the historian of the Cobra group, Ernest Mancoba's work had scarcely anything in common with that of his fellow artists" but that she had based this view on his naturalistic work which showed his "African origins" (2001:32). See Obrist interview (2002) for Mancoba's comments on his exclusion from Cobra. See also Araeen (2005:412) for a most recent instance of his exclusion.

Mancoba comments on the incorrect perception that Cobra was exclusively European in conception: Some art critics and historians, and *even*, maybe, a few artists have, in my opinion, made the mistake to see Cobra as a movement that is, by definition, limited in its inspiration and membership to people of Nordic and European origin and closed to the contribution of what they see as alien expressions... Assef Jörn knew the danger of Cobra being misunderstood, in its legitimate revindication of popular roots, and, while claiming an inspiration, partly in the Viking culture, the Scandinavian heritage or the 'vandal' impact, he clearly refused to fall into any form of pan-Nordism - unlike certain when, especially among commentators (Obrist interview 2002:20),

There continues to be a separation of white and black modernism in South African art history texts (see Fall & Pivin 2000 for example). Although these artists worked under significantly different conditions, there is, to my knowledge, insufficient art historical work being done on the similarities of their output.

As David Bunn has noted: "Fifties, sixties and seventies art historical analysis was bedeviled by the understanding that black artists appeared to have a different sense of spatial scale and perspective" (Bunn, 1999).

In the few training centres for black artists in South Africa, formal techniques were often minimally taught and at times enacted the view that an 'authenticity' was being lost through Western education (even in the cases of artists who had grown up in the cities)." Teachers encouraged black students to produce 'Africanist' works that evidenced an innate African essence (see chapter 2). The relevance of peer influence and the construction of black identity in the perpetuation of this view is also to be noted. Additionally, white envy of a perceived black access to a 'unique' creativity is suggested as a point of further investigation for singular accounts of this time.

Mancoba's negotiation with the traditions of perspective and the trend towards abstraction are evident in the shifts in his representative approaches whilst still in South Africa. These shifts speak to the notion of transported praxis. At Grace Dieu, sculpture as an applied and functional medium was encouraged (by Sister Pauline for example). His sculptures including the *African Madonna* (1928) performed a didactic/ecclesiastical role in the community of the missionary school and took on a realistic form. His later interactions with artists Lippy Lipshitz and Irma Stem in Cape Town and the books and climate of artistic innovation prompted an 'art for art's sake' view — seeking formal inspiration from African sculpture as was a trend in Europe at the time (primitivism). This was incorporated into various sculptural forms such as *Faith* (1936) and *Musician* (1936). Miles comments that in *Faith* "Mancoba was first reconciled to the art of Africa and freed himself of the Western Christian-Colonial style" (Miles 1994:24). Miles does note (and this is reinforced in Thompson's curatorship discussed later), that a central shift in Mancoba's art had taken place prior to his departure:

When Mancoba left for Europe, he had already freed himself from the ecclesiastical style of Western Europe. He was well imbued with this as a result of Anglo-Saxon schooling ... (Miles 1994:31).

In Paris, Mancoba, influenced by trends in representation, specifically the contravention of mimesis, moved away from naturalistic forms and "... investigated the autonomy of line", arguably a significant conceptual shift. With the Cobra movement there was also a confluence of such ideas, as Maurice Denis describes in their manifesto: "A picture is no longer merely a construction of colours and lines, but an animal, a night, a scream, a human

¹Even those born and raised in cities are interpreted as torn between a traditional heritage and the demands of a modern world" (Van Robbroeck 2003:179).

being, or all together" (cited in Miles 1997:142). Miles further comments on Sonja and Mancoba's continued interest in the pictorial debates of the time:

Together they would reflect on the meaning of perspective and on the illusion of space that goes with it. To them, the Renaissance idea of perspective being a fixed point of view was limiting. Through it the artist trapped the observer and deprived him of his own interpretation. Thus the work of art becomes prescriptive and not liberating (communication with Mancoba in Pans, 1990 in Miles 1994:35).

Along with Cobra's expressed interest in instinctual and spontaneous expression, Mancoba has evoked Freud in describing his approach (Thompson video interview 1994). It is in the move toward the symbolic that Mancoba locates his contribution to perspectival debates, as Bridget Thompson elaborates (see also Obrist interview 2002:19):

He was not the first to deconstruct what he called 'the problem of perspective', being preceded by Cubism, and of course Mancoba recognized that the Cubists were the first to break the stranglehold of perspective in Western art and he respected this significant contribution. He contended however that they hadn't gone far enough to entirely solve the problem of perspective because they had left Western art floundering in search of the spirit, in search of meaning. In particular they did not provide a symbolic framework which embraced the people whose art inspired them (Thompson 2006:79).

After the death of Sonja Ferlov in 1984, Mancoba "progressively stripped his images of referential material. It appeared that he was reverting more and more to a language without boundaries, hence his preference for signs" (Miles 1994:71).

Depicted distance, I suggest, is used to organize a key understanding of Mancoba's life and art: that he challenged the exclusivity of claims over the representation of distance, i.e. who was/is 'authorised' to abstract and distort. Some writers go further and suggest that he prefigured other avant-garde movements in Europe and America in his unique approach to the formal questions of the time (Araeen 2005). Others suggest that Mancoba 'transcended' such debates by searching for the symbolic and spiritual (Thompson 2005). During an 'artists' workshop' (27-30 June 2006) moderated by the *Art and Ubuntu Trust* — an organisation devoted to preserving and promoting the legacy of Ernest Mancoba — discussion on the second day was devoted to Mancoba and "the problem of perspective". From the report of this session (Khoisan 2006:117-118), it seems that there is much scope for research into Western teachings of perspective (after the Italian School) and the impact of this knowledge on African traditions.

To summarise, I have raised the following issues under the heading of depicted distance as they concern Mancoba: the changes that are evident in his early work from realism to abstracted forms; stereotypes regarding black Africans and their visual perception of the world; his participation in formal debates in Europe and current debates regarding the placement of his aesthetic. Regarding the last point, there is considerable debate about the relationship between African and European artistic forms particularly during the early twentieth-century. It is to these interpretive debates that I turn next.

3.3 DISTANCE: INTERPRETIVE

What follows is a brief account of the spaces between different writings on Ernest Mancoba. These are not meant as definitive representations of the authors' views I present, rather I perceive, in my reading of these texts, shifts in emphasis that underscore the importance of acknowledging interpretive distance in our understanding of early black African modernism. I invoke the idea of the hermeneutic circle as representative of this distance, i.e. the perpetual circling of the subject through interpretations — always attempting to get closer to his/her motivations and the broader meaning of his/her work whilst acknowledging the position of the interpreter. I begin by looking at published discussions on Mancoba and African modernism. This is followed by a look at the conceptualisation of and catalogue essays from the most recent exhibition on Mancoba at the Gold For Africa Museum titled: *In The Name of All Humanity: The African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba* in 2006. The central issue I raise of these texts, and this exhibition, is that they frame Mancoba in different ways so as to understand and describe the formation and nature of African modernism. In doing so they create distance from each other (in their shifts in emphasis); and, by focussing on certain aspects of Mancoba's life and omitting others, from the artist in question. A point of common ground must first be noted: Rasheed Araeen, Olu Oguibe, Denis Ekpo and Bridget Thompson, writing in the pages of *Third Text* (Vol. 19 Issue 4 2005), in a dedicated discussion on Ernest Mancoba and African modernism(s), all agree on the hindrance of focusing exclusively on colonial criticism — the "culture of complaint" — and that Africans need to take charge of their own destiny in this regard. How this is to be achieved in Mancoba's case is differently suggested or enacted.

The following accounts are presented separately and with only minor commentary and comparison. This is to be done once the four views have been detailed.

33.1 MANCOBA AND MAINSTREAM MODERNISM: RASH= ARAEEN

Regarding the fraught and contested history of colonialism, modernity and art in Africa, postcolonial theory and theories of the subaltern expound the view of the perpetual cycle of the suppression of the 'African' subject and the continuous desire for, "recognition and legitimisation [from the 'Wesel of whatever its artists do" (Araeen 2005:411). Rasheed Araeen asks whether this "postcolonial state of dependency" is "conducive to the development of an artistic vision which is modern and Africa's own?" and whether there is a critical discourse with which to measure Mancoba's contribution to this task (2005:414).

The urgency of an African perspective is set against the backdrop of the persistent exclusion of African artists from Western narratives (although Araeen acknowledges a certain "spectacle of multiculturalism" in the present). Citing Mancoba's recent exclusion from a Cobra retrospective at the Stedelijk museum in Holland, Araeen suggests that Mancoba faces the prospect of being "written out of history" (2005:412). His reason for this, echoed in the previous chapters, is that Mancoba poses a "threat to the Eurocentric historical trajectory and genealogy of mainstream modernism ..." (*ibid*) and hence it is "logical or rational for the Western institution [of art], given the fact that Eurocentricity is fundamental to the West's continuing colonial vision — based on presumed supremacy over the others — to act as a shield to any threat of this vision" (2005:414). The situation, as Araeen highlights, points to the need for an African version of modernism in the cultural sphere: *firstly*, to redress imbalances of the past and act so as to resist pervasive colonial attitudes in the present; and *secondly*, to assist in providing the historical groundwork and current support for Africa's cultural workers.

There is a certain amount of ambiguity in Araeen's recommendations, as Olu Oguibe points out (2005:419). On the one hand, Araeen criticises African theorists and historians who benefit from repeated shouts of abuse to the West, on the other and in the case of Mancoba, he proceeds to recall the instances and motivations for his exclusion from art history. Nonetheless, Araeen asks pertinent questions about *where* writing and theorisation of African modernism needs to arise, and where it cannot be expected to:

This task will have to be performed by Africans themselves, because it would be unreasonable to expect the West to pursue something that would demolish the very foundation on which its supremacy is based (2005:417).

And elsewhere:

What did African artists really do when they found themselves in the West? Did they just follow the already beaten track of Western art, or did they find their own way within modernist developments? The institutions in the West are silent about this

important question. They would rather prefer this question never to be raised, because they cannot answer it within the prevailing colonial structures while they still protect them.

Despite this, if my reading is correct, Araeen situates Mancoba's contribution (more centrally than the other writers discussed) within the pictorial narrative of mainstream modernism'.

What I am trying to suggest is that Mancoba's work may represent a historical breakthrough within mainstream modernism (2005:417).

His discussion, including an analysis of *Composition* (1940), is that Mancoba played a more pivotal role within mainstream modernism than he is credited with, arguably prefiguring Abstract Expressionism in America and Informal in Europe (Araeen 2005:417). It is with this acknowledgment, i.e. that Africa has already shown an original, valid and hence valuable contribution to modernism, that a new discourse on African modernism can arise with confidence. The method of this kind of approach to Mancoba and his work would entail a formal analysis based on a detailed look at Mancoba's pictorial innovation *in relation* to previous and future trends *in Europe* at the time. Indeed, as Araeen points out:

Would [Mancoba] have done this painting [*Composition* (1940)] while in South Africa? For that matter, would Picasso have done *Demaiselles d'Avignon* while still in Spain? The answer is no, because neither South Africa nor Spain would have provided them with the necessary context for an experiential encounter with a kind of knowledge that would have triggered their imaginations to produce the kind of work they did (2005:416).

Araeen is also critical of approaches to African modernism that focus exclusively on the 'Africanness' of the works and in doing so bypass the artists' modernity:

There are of course some sympathetic voices ... with a great admiration for African artists' 'Africanness'. But this admiration often overlooks the modernity of African artists' work, and use their 'Africanness' as the only measure of these works (Araeen 2003:102).

If, as Araeen concludes, we look at Picasso on more formalistic grounds — i.e. comparing work before and after in terms of formal developments — why should we not view Mancoba in a similar light? This approach, in Araeen's view, would focus attention on their modern expression and the elements they contribute to mainstream modernism. Olu Oguibe, however, suggests an alternative emphasis.

3.3.2 MANCOBA AND AFRICAN MODERNISM(S): OLD °GUIDE

Olu Oguibe's response to Araeen, with the ambitious title, "The True Location of Ernest Mancoba's modernism", argues that there is no merit in contesting for acknowledgement in modernist narratives, it "is a no-brainer and a no-winner" (2005:419). Rather,

what is required now is that we read, within the frames of a larger historical moment than modernism ever was, namely the struggles of colonised peoples to contest their predicament and forge their modernity._ (2005:420).

For Oguibe, this "forgeing" of modernity is achieved by Mancoba in his attainment of an individual expression through reverse appropriation: Mancoba "arrives at a stage of resolution analogous to the emergence of modern individualism in African consciousness" (2005:419). The task of Art History, in searching for narratives, groups and styles, in this case seeking to delineate an African modernism, is to establish comparable instances of this individual expression of modernity and its attainment through appropriation. Seen in this light, Mancoba's place in the undertaking of distilling and promoting an African modernism, if it is to be described, is that of role model: an artist who succeeded in realising his own artistic goals, despite working against the grain. If this is to be implemented, an historical writings about early African artists and the conditions of their production need to be interrogated and compared in all their complexity, including an understanding of colonial suppression and the tactics of transgression and appropriation in response. In the case of Mancoba, as Oguibe (2002) suggests, his relationship to Negritude and other pan-African developments in the early to mid 1900s needs to be fully explored. It is in their similar aesthetic intention: to relocate a "colonial desire from the exclusivist and suprematist sites of Enlightenment aesthetics to the territory of African forms and paradigms" (Oguibe 2002:259) that Mancoba and these philosophies are to be understood. Elsewhere, Oguibe has described this appropriation in comparison to other early African modernists:

Rather than quote pre-modernist Western form, as Onabolu and Mold, or Western modernism, as did Sekoto, Mancoba referenced African sculpture on the specifically modernist principle of formalist articulation (2002:236).

In the context of his appropriation's of European and African forms "by electing classical African art as its model" (2002:256) — influenced by pan African and Negritude ideas — Oguibe suggests that Mancoba centrally anticipated a nationalist strategy that came to the

"... not one of iteration or even direct quotation. Instead he [Mancoba] employed the rhetoric of allusion" (Oguibe 2002:258)

fore in African artistic centres from the late 1950s onwards" and which demonstrated a new modernism:

This aesthetic would locate the nationalist imperative not in the reverse appropriation of Europe, but in the translation and foregrounding of colonised forms and through this the fabrication of new national cultures, and a new modernism (Oguibe 2002:259).

Denis Ekpo, however, draws attention to certain dangers present in this emphasis on the role of Negritude and African nationalism.

3.3.3 MANCOBA AND AFRICAN NATIONALISM: DENIS Ekpo

In both past and present projects concerning modernity and modernism in the arts in Africa, Denis Ekpo notes the potential for Negritude and pan-Africanist ideologies to taint intentions and discard complexity in order to promote national or continental agendas — a perceived 'Afrocentric narcissism'. Ekpo elaborates, most compellingly, that the rhetoric of anti-colonial "aesthetico-ideological models, pictures, and slogans" which followed negritudinal and adversarial approaches, i.e. a "... negritude-derived rhetoric of self reliance" (2005:425) is destructive to the task of determining the nature of African modernism(s), and calls these the "aesthetico-ideological bad seeds" (*ibid*). Extending this to Mancoba, there is a need to rescue Mancoba and African modernism, as Denis Ekpo argues, from "the bewitchment of the mind of the African by Negritude, Afrocentrism, anti-imperialism, modernism and postcolonialism" (2005:426). Ekpo's example, i.e. one way that this pervasive response is negative, is that unfounded negative attitudes towards the west shut out different or newer and perhaps more useful interpretations and that "this is the real intellectual predicament of Africa's modernity/modernism " (Ekpo 2005:426).

The difficulty, Ekpo agrees with Araeen, is in the paucity of 'real' African presence in the modernist arena — there are too few artists to choose from⁸⁰ or to establish a 'movement'. Following from this observation, an isolated formalistic account of African modernism seems unsustainable. There are, however, certain pressures exerted by patriotic "ideologues" and cultural theorists to *create* a nationalist identity where perhaps certain complexities need first consideration. For example, the negative light cast on Western roles in African modernism by anti-west rhetoric and complaint needs to be unpacked in order to consider the real negotiation between African subjects and colonial influence. It is with a certain kind of

⁸⁰ Oguibe looks at the ways Mancoba's art prefigured the formation of the Zaria Arc Society formed in Nigeria in 1958 (2002:259).

Although in the realm of literature, Ekpo suggests, there was an abundance of contributors which adequately compensates for the paucity of visual artists. Debate on modernism in art can benefit from the struggles in the literary arts (Ekpo 2005:424).

nationalism that Bridget Thompson focusses her attention in her conceptualisation of an exhibition on Ernest Mancoba and 'African spiritual expression'.

3.3.4 MANCOBA AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY: BRIDGET THOMPSON

The 2006 exhibition of Mancoba's work at the Gold for Africa exhibition is, according to Bridget Thompson (curator, filmmaker and writer):

... intended to explore the South African and African roots of Mancoba's aesthetic. It will find the points of connection between the philosophy and aesthetic that Mancoba took with him into exile and then distilled in his work, and has its roots and continued existence here (2005:422).

The emphasis in the curatorship and accompanying catalogue essays is undoubtedly on the role of Africa in Mancoba's life and art. For this purpose it is accented that the majority of his formation as an artist and thinker occurred *before he left* as "he had already established his philosophical and aesthetic approach ..." and "... his path had already been decided a long time before, and very consciously and deliberately by drawing on the best of South African and African philosophy and aesthetics" (2005:421). Thompson also notes the centrality of African philosophy imparted to him by his mother: "This was his destiny as an artist and was premised on the African philosophical teachings of his mother" (2005:421). There is also, demonstrated in the exhibition and catalogue, a perceived link between Mancoba's aesthetic and traditional Xhosa beadwork. The *interpreted* connections that Thompson explores through the process of understanding of Mancoba's *oeuvre* is "revealing an aesthetic so profoundly rooted in South African pre-industrial art forms" (2005:422).

In the exhibition Mancoba's work is juxtaposed with a large number of, historically termed, 'primitive' artefacts including rock implements, shells and traditional beadwork, and other sculptural pieces such as a Kota reliquary and Kanaga mask. There is very little connecting his aesthetic to other artists within the Cobra movement or abstraction in Europe and America.

This emphasis on his African influence does have a close corroboration with Mancoba's own writing and ideas expressed in interviews. Mancoba has frequently elaborated on his interest in ancient 'artistic' expressions in Africa as well as the urge to represent these forms in dialogue with the West:

As you know, it is when I was told by my friend, the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz, that a younger generation of European artist had begun to be inspired by the art of Africa ... that I felt the need to enter into a dialogue with them ,, (Obrist interview 2002:18).

33.5 INTERPRETIVE DISTANCE: SOME CONCLUSIONS

In presenting the above views, my intention is to highlight the potential of the category of interpretive distance in facilitating a *thinking through* of Mancoba and African modernism. I do this by locating multiple authorial positions (and agendas), which enables a more comparative approach, and to respond in my own way.

The positions of the four authors, broadly speaking, are characterized by the chosen headings, i.e. Mancoba and *mainstream modernism*, *African modernism(s)*, *African nationalism* and *African spirituality*, respectively. The common ground between the authors has not been fully explored, rather their differences accentuated in order to highlight the relevance of 'distance'. This occurs, on the one level, between the writers who express opposing views and, on the other, between their accounts and the artist himself, his intentions, motivations and influences. I should also comment that these authors do suggest areas where further research and dialogue needs to happen when looking at African modernism and hence, do not present closed accounts by any means. Rather, their views at a glance, and for the purposes of this thesis, highlight the problems of attempting to re-write historical narratives such as modernism and the dangers of politicising art history. Mancoba and his art, in these two instances, present the site of a political engagement between Western narratives and nationalist strategies and the inevitable distance of interpretation. The central questions I raise in response to the problems of re-writing and of politicising art history are: *Can Mancoba be called a quintessential African modernist, if so for what purpose? Conversely, has there been a negation of Europe's part in his formation as an artist and thinker in order to promote such a stance? To what extent did Negritude and pan-Africanism influence Mancoba? What role did liberal white artists and educators play in promoting an African aesthetic in his work?* I advance these questions as guides to thinking through the task of writing art history about Mancoba and African Modernism. By doing so, I highlight contingency in our present understanding and in our questioning of the 'accepted' historical archive. I now elaborate on some of the distances between the authors above and, in conclusion, reinforce the value of the singular account described in chapter 2. This constitutes my own view, and which, together with those described above, collaborates in the combined task of understanding this period of artistic history ... *circling*.

By emphasising aspects of his biography, several writers have eschewed the complexity and perhaps ambiguity in his formation as an artist and thinker in order to focus on his connection with a perceived 'African essence'. I refer in particular to Bridget Thompson's curatorship which promotes a strong reading of this 'essence'. Although Thompson quotes Mancoba's own assertions in this Africanist regard, my view is that artists' own words should not dominate broader historical interpretation - the intentional fallacy. Additionally, I suggest

that Mancoba's philosophy, closely examined, displays nuance, contradiction and complexity which points towards an open-ended reading. His life history, sketched previously, also points to this. However, I do not intend to negate Mancoba's spiritual connection to the continent (and Thompson's significant contribution in investigating this connection) by advancing a current 'academic' approach to the study of Africa — namely by interrogating the "invention of Africa" or "the idea of Africa" (after Mudimbe). Studies of this kind seek to unpack both Western (and subsequently internalised) views of the African continent. I am, however, concerned that a certain kind of nationalistic agenda, which emerges in Thompson and others' attempts to delineate a local modernism, unnecessarily simplifies history. It is the complex interaction of subjectivities both within South Africa and Europe that are sidelined in favour of such narratives. I also agree with Rasheed Araeen, quoted above, that emphasising 'Africanness' in historical accounts of the modernist period, runs the risk of losing sight of the artist's expressions of modernity.

In other words, there is risk in designating Mancoba as a quintessential African artist — one who accesses such an elusive concept as 'African creativity'. This risk, in my view exists both because certain historical contingencies are bypassed and, Africa — as a cohesive unit — has been sufficiently problematised in recent scholarship: as Kwame Appiah so economically asserts, "Africa is various" (1992:9x).⁶¹

Oguibe has also commented that, "we cannot discuss an African modernity or 'modernisms' without agreeing first on either the fictiveness of 'Africanity' or the imperative of a plurality of 'modernisms' in Africa" (1999:322). But he further explains that, "to undermine the idea of 'The African' is to exterminate an entire discursive and referential system and endanger whole agendas" (Oguibe 1999:323). I note two possible agendas behind the idea of 'The African' as they have emerged in my research and which relate to the current topic: firstly, to maintain an exoticised 'Other' image of Africa; and secondly, to strongly oppose pervasive Eurocentric attitudes to Africa in global cultural and political sectors through solidarity. The question is whether the strategy of countering Eurocentricism with Africanism (with its own sets of assumptions, rhetorical affirmations and stereotypes) is a worthwhile task and whether it makes for good history? With Mancoba, I am prompted to view this strategy with caution following his repeated claims that his work spoke to and of, *all humanity* and the diverse factors constituting his experiences in the world. As previously mentioned, Mancoba equally dismisses nationalistic strategies aimed at redress. I quote again:

Appiah (1992) negates the myth of uniquely African qualities in terms of culture, race or impulse.

Anyway, I have never been convinced, as far as I am concerned, by the validity - even with the best intentions, as for instance, to redress past Injustices - of any kind of ethnic praise or by the singing of a particular race's virtues (Obrist interview 2002:17).

My proposal is that the nature of the 'politicised' arena of art history - one that includes and excludes certain factors - needs to be foregrounded in discussion of African modernism(s) in order to promote a more nuanced narrative. It also needs to consider the motivations and political or ideological allegiances of the historian/theorists. History of this period, as many writers before me have argued, needs to come to terms with the complex subjectivities of both author and subject. In other words, what is the nature of the interaction of subjectivities in the act of writing history? In this case, what do Bridget Thompson or Olu Oguibe bring to the history of Ernest Mancoba: what political or ideological slant or personal interracial experiences? Race, I have previously suggested, is still pertinent to the subject. Conversely, what does Mancoba bring to them *across time*?

I am here forwarding a more nuanced approach to art history by looking at the individual subjectivities involved. Denis Ekpo presents the case that for such a task as unpacking modernism/modernity in Africa, the impact of Negritude and Afrocentricism in the arts at both a national level and an internalised (subjective) level need to be interrogated. This seems to be particularly pertinent to Mancoba's case as he has spoken of a deep and critical dialogue with these ideas (see earlier discussion). Related to this 'uncovering' of subjectivities is that of the psychological impact of exile. Speaking largely of political exile, Morrow, Maaba and Pulumani, capture an essence of this experience that I suggest aids understanding of Mancoba's own experience:

... [political exiles] are cerebral emigrants, living in a world constructed from ideas, longing and imagination ... In this context the motherland is recreated from memory and exile is endowed with tragedy and nobility of suffering bravely endured, exiles need constantly to reaffirm the existence and importance of an ideal that could easily be lost in the receding past or buried under the weight of day-to-day existence ... (cited in Richards 2006:67).

Besides the experience of exile and heightened feelings of nationalism, influenced by the philosophies of Negritude and pan-Africanism, I have also, throughout this chapter, noted the formative Western influences in Mancoba's life. This includes, to problematise Oguibe's position, the encouragements of white artists to engage African art on formalistic terms. It stands to reason that investigation into the relationship between European influences and the emergence of an African modern idiom would highlight further instances of such interpersonal relationships. Such investigation is conducted not by looking at general colonial

patterns in Africa and generalised responses, but at the individual experiences of artists working at this time.

In promoting the singular approach to Ernest Mancoba, I am guided by a perceived necessity to respect the open-endedness of his artistic project. I also take the view that within art communities, strategy, motivation and influence are ever-present.

As investigated in the first chapter, there is a need to maintain a culture of criticism that seeks to interrogate motivations behind categorisations and the establishment of canons in an history, particularly for the task of re-writing African art history. My argument is for greater consideration of individual cause and motivation when approaching early African modernism and my contribution, in this thesis, has been to show that 'distance' as a conceptual category/thematic is useful to this task.

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CONCLUSION

Centripetal *adj.* moving towards a centre

In this thesis, I have attempted to establish the category of 'distance' as a useful approach to South African art history and to demonstrate this by applying it to Ernest Mancoba and African modernism.

I began by looking at writers who have, over the past thirty years, problematised the study of art history. The central concerns of these critical voices were directed at an older 'traditional' approach to the discipline. Under the rubric 'the new art history' the criticism seemed to focus on: narrow accounts of the contexts of art, the establishment of the canon, the language of history (and art history) and sexism and Eurocentricism in the discipline. The impact of this criticism on South African art history was noted, as was the political climate which resulted in both stagnation (in syllabi) but also action and subversion.

In chapter 1 I also established 'distance' as a recurring thematic in art and art history. Distance appears in the conventions of fine art (specifically painting), in the establishment of centres of the avant-garde, and also in the space between written an history and the artists or periods they 'record' — *interpretive distances*. Although these instances are arguably of different orders of distance, the approach I have adopted in this thesis is partly literary, i.e. 'distance' as trope, and in this sense 'distance' provides for both continuity and style despite the different senses of the word. It is nonetheless, and most importantly, an analytical construct: distance as heuristic was used to organise my understanding of modernism and Ernest Mancoba. By extending its usage to that of a conceptual category, 'distance' — as *interpretive distance* — also facilitated the explication of opposing views on African modernism and encompassed my own.

In Chapter 2, I sought to problematise modernism as a Western construct with negative implications for Africa's art and artists. I examined, in part, a particular historian's critical approach, following those elaborated in chapter I. Lize van Robboeck's "deconstruction" of modernist tendencies in South African art history demonstrated a close relationship to Enlightenment-informed modernist discourses pertaining to the 'Other in these texts. These discourses belied a set of contradictions when approaching the modern Hack subject. I relied

on the force of her critique when writing about black African modernists and their transgressions of the distance created by Eurocentricism in the arts.

I concluded this chapter by extending Van Robbroeck's appeal for singularity in approaching African modernism. The suggestions for a singular approach to an history in South Africa, which emerged in the conclusion to her thesis, were significant to the formulation of my own views in chapter 3 and the conclusion to this thesis. Most importantly, singularity highlights the extent to which artists participate in the active construction of [their] own racialisation" and through this assert unique subjectivity (Van Robbroeck 2006:255). In addition, there is a need to acknowledge complexity and contingency in our current understandings of history — that authoritative historical accounts are things of the past (Van Robbroeck 2006).

In relation to distance, this chapter focused on a critical instance of its occurrence (both past and present) — the notion of 'Othering'. Distance also emerged in the image of singularity. The image of the singular account acted as a counterpoint to conventional approaches: from art history that has often adopted a birds-eye-view of movements and cycles to an individual, and hence *close* account.

My intention in chapter 3 was to use 'distance' in the task of writing an history about Ernest Mancoba and to compare different accounts of him. After initial biographical information I divided the chapter into three senses of distance: depicted, geographic and interpretive. Under these headings, the complex relationships between Ernest Mancoba, modernism and the discipline of art history emerged, thus reinforcing the necessity for the singular account.

Understanding the complexity of this period (roughly between 1920-1960) lies in historical and contextual analysis of broader an historical accounts as well as individual life stories through critical re-readings. Past and present accounts, through rhetoric and convention, sought/seek, as is the nature of historical discourse, to situate, frame and group — at times within national borders and national agendas (history is always a politicised project) or according to perceived/imposed formal affinities. Attempts at delineating and describing a black African modernism is complicated by the "paucity" of artists and the vast geographic territory this proposes (Ekpo 2005). Hence, in juxtaposition to the European example, formal analysis in terms of stylistic affinities between pioneer black African modernists is difficult, and the individual and social account seems to me to be a more suitable approach. For such a socially oriented reading, significant lines of comparison can then be drawn concerning the lived experiences of artists working across the continent at this time — in

particular, the experience of a *transported* praxis — from the West to Africa — and the various modes of its introduction into their lives (for example, via missionary schooling and training centres and white mentors).

To understand these experiences the singular approach is promoted in this thesis. Singularity intends to 'thicken' our interpretations with more nuanced individual analysis ... in a centripetal movement onwards.

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